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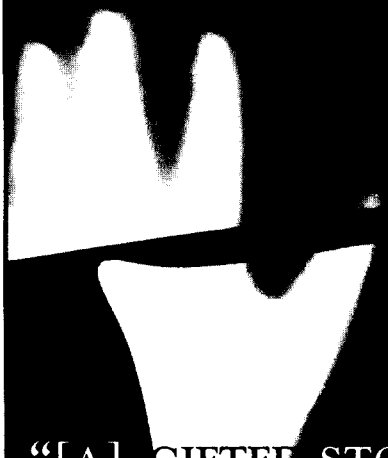

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TO OUR READERS

A new book by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, it will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

GARY KRIST: *Bone by Bone.* Harcourt Brace & Company. $19.95.

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Comment:

Veblen and the Mall of America

WHEN IT'S CROWDED, YOU DRIVE UP THE LEVELS of the parking ramp, from California to Hawaii to Arizona, and on to Nevada and Colorado. At the entrance to each level is posted a corresponding symbol: sunglasses for California, pineapple for Hawaii, cactus for Arizona, dice for Nevada, mountains for Colorado. In reality, we have none of these. No endless summer, no tropical sweetness, no desert, no roulette wheels, no cloudy peaks. It is December in Bloomington, Minnesota. The sky is a quilted grey mass and the world is flat, white and frozen to the horizon.

But the nation's largest shopping mall, which calls itself the Mall of America, offers refuge from the numbing winter. The ramp has no level named for Nebraska or New Jersey; the associations are all wrong. Neither has it a Minnesota—for Minnesota surrounds us and we have enough of reality.

Today, I find a space in Arizona, where the red-nosed attendant flaps his arms against the cold, and head into the heated walkway. It is three weeks before Christmas. Along with 100,000 other people this day and more than four million since it opened, I am here to see the latest and by far the biggest in American emporiums. Bars, amusement rides and 14 movie theaters share a vast roof with 370 stores. We locals recognize the primacy of scale and call it simply the Megamall.

In essential ways, every shopping mall is the same. They are cargo ships on seas of angled parking, beckoning us to come, look, eat, buy. The Megamall is not a ship but an armada. No one can walk there, buffered as it is by asphalt and freeways. It is built on the scale of airports and stadiums, intended to have a relationship with the crowd, not the individual.

The titanic mall may be peculiar to this time of endless diversions and few answers for the things that most worry us—rising crime, insecure jobs, a fickle economy. But every age produces its own excess. Nearly a century ago, economist Thorstein Veblen complained about Americans who cared too much for status and too little for "the collective life." In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen coined the terms conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste. He had no trouble finding plenty of both.

As it happens, Veblen grew up as the son of industrious Norwegian immigrants on a farm about an hour's drive south of the Megamall. After decades of neglect, the home and barn built by Veblen's father

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Coming in the Autumn 1994 issue of The Hudson Review: "The New Simplicity in Music," by Josiah Fisk, "E-Mail," a story by Lawrence Douglas, memoirs by Hayden Carruth, Karen Wilkin on Anthony Caro, and poems by Maxine Kumin, Mark Jarman, Daniel Hoffman, John Frederick Nims.

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are being restored. To Veblen's admirers, the sturdy Greek revival house embodies the values he most respected—altruism ("the parental bent"), craftsmanship ("workmanship") and critical intelligence ("idle curiosity"). He decried more "predatory" values—pecuniary gain and a form of winning through intimidation which he called "sportsmanship" because of the brute force and affectation he found in many sports.

Definitely not a sports bar or shop-until-you-drop kind of guy. With his clarity of values, he'll be a good counterpoint to my Megamall tour. For here I am, about to enter Macy's, appalled and intrigued, determined to stay aloof, to be an observer, but with credit cards in my pocket. For Christmas, I've asked for some books, a bedside lamp, a pottery bowl. I didn't ask for a leather recliner, an espresso machine, tickets to Negril. But I'd like them all. My desires are doubtless driven by social norms and marketing, as Veblen says. But desire is driven also by cravings of spirit. I want leisure, comfort, the searing beauty of bougainvillea in January.

Hold the psychic prattle, Veblen would say. As he wrote in *Leisure Class*, "The standard of expenditure which commonly guides our efforts is not the average, ordinary expenditure already achieved; it is an ideal of consumption that lies just beyond our reach. Or to reach which requires some strain. The motive is emulation." In other words, my cravings of spirit are merely another dreary violation of the ninth commandment, the injunction against material covetousness.

I enter the mall on the third floor of Macy's, surrounded by families who joke about leaving the car in Nevada and arrange where to meet if someone gets lost. We are in the small-appliance department, the perfect place for a Veblenian critique since most of the electrified gadgets perform jobs once done more simply, by hand. Veblen was no foe of change. He prized technological innovation; he just wanted it to contribute to the common good. Many appliances have done just that. Once, at a history museum, I saw a photograph from the 1940s of women in hats and dresses gazing admiringly at a wall of shiny electric irons. Plugging in the steam iron is surely a big improvement over shoving hot flatirons across sizzling cotton. Permapressed is even better.

This season's headliner appliances, with big displays on the major aisles, are electronic bread makers and heart monitors. Macy's is featuring the Panasonic bread maker, for $349.99, and the Gym Man Talking Heart Rate Monitor, for $99.90. In the photo on the Gym Man's carton, a muscular man climbs mythical steps on a StairMaster, his skin shining, his rib cage hugged by a chunky yellow belt that looks like a cameraman's battery pack. The belt plays music, counts his heartbeat and measures his elapsed time simultaneously. The bread maker's carton has photos of a white plastic box with many dials and a crested cube of brown bread.

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There's clearly more than bread and pulse rates at issue. Veblen would quote John Stuart Mill: "'It is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being'" because—to use Veblen's words now—"as increased industrial efficiency makes it possible to procure the means of livelihood with less labor, the energies of the industrious members of the community are bent to the compassing of a higher result in conspicuous expenditure, rather than slackened to a more comfortable pace."

Veblen had other uses for his industry. To buy the freedom to say what he thought in eleven books on everything from social mores to German imperialism, he kept his wants modest. As a writer, he was never a big seller. As a teacher, he never stayed long enough at one institution to get tenure. So he lived simply and bartered for services. At Stanford, he provided a cottage and food to two students and their father in exchange for work done by the students. They cooked, kept things clean and took care of Veblen's horses. I doubt that he cared whether the bread was homemade.

There is, of course, something wonderful about making bread the old, slow, manual way. The tough heel of the hand working the dough. The dough filling the pans as it swells with air. The air ripe with the scent of steaming loaves. There is also something wonderful about taking pulses. The summer I was eighteen, I worked as a nurse's aide, taking temperatures and pulses before breakfast. I also had to inquire about patients' bowel movements. How I hated asking. How cheerfully the elderly patients told me, happy for any sign of regularity. When I had recorded their answers, I touched my fingers to their cool, thin wrists and counted, my embarrassment fading against the weary cadence of old hearts.

The electronic bread maker and pulse taker have status appeal—Veblen's "secondary utility as evidence of a relative ability to pay." They have mechanical exactitude. The Panasonic bread will not fail to rise. The Gym Man's pulse never falters. But something has been lost. No one would associate these machines with feeble bodies or the delicate stew of fermentation. They seem to defy the messiness of being human.

John Kenneth Galbraith once wrote that Veblen "did what every thinking man would like to do if he had the time, the tenacity, and the mental endowment. . . . Taking all knowledge for his province, he climbed a mountaintop and surveyed the whole life of mankind."

To read Veblen is to be amazed by his knowledge of obscure tribes, ancient history, British customs, ladies' fashion. What Galbraith called his "polysyllabic profundity" draws from the anthropology, sociology, psychology, technology and biology he read and learned about at the University of Chicago and Yale. His ideas draw too from a deep well of values. The values of hard work, ingenuity and sacrifice of self for others were shaped in part by his parents' example. His father was a

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farmer and skilled carpenter who set the pace for work crews and modified his house and barn constantly to make life easier and work profitable enough to send nine children to college. His mother was midwife and folk doctor to their small village. In Thorstein's accounting of the world around him, everything is measured by its value to "the collective life."

Even here at the Megamall, a place devoted to the satisfaction of private wants, there is recognition of our desire for life in community. Each of the broad aisles that make up the four-floor shopping cube has a street name and an architectural conceit: neon for East Broadway, lattices on North Garden, pushcarts on West Market, wood trim for South Avenue. Camp Snoopy, the amusement park at the Megamall's center, has concrete walkways scored and painted to look like flagstones. It is like Disney's idealized towns—relentlessly clean and cheerful, for visitors only. When meaner streets intrude—as when three young men were shot in Camp Snoopy over the attempted theft of a Starter jacket—few visitors noticed. They thought the gunfire was part of the ambience.

The mall promotes itself as "a place for fun in your life." With the tinsel and clapper of Christmas, fun is flushed and teeming. In the atrium outside Macy's, a young pianist surrounded by poinsettias chases Rachmaninoff up and down the keyboard. The crowd is bigger in the atrium near Bloomingdale's, where a police band in blue trousers and white shirts plays a lively pastiche of Mozart and "Jingle Bells," Beethoven and "Silent Night." I think of other crowds I've joined, crowds that gathered more spontaneously to break the usual rules of public decorum. When the Minnesota Twins won the World Series, sensible citizens shinnied up light poles in delirious pleasure. When Hubert Humphrey died, lines of people who had met him once, twice or not at all waited on the chilly steps of the State Capitol for their turns to say goodbye. At such times, some fierce emotion or a desire to be part of the common history causes us to click off the TV, step outside and trespass boundaries between strangers. No one comes to a shopping mall in search of the commonweal. One comes to seek the weal.

But even here, unbidden, connections are sometimes made. To the right of the stage, a blonde girl of eleven or twelve sits in a wheelchair. Her face is narrow and impassive, her eyes deeply set and private, her mouth agape. Behind her stand her parents. The father is a lean, worn man wearing cowboy boots and a brown silk jacket with a dragon stitched in bonfire colors across the back. The mother is soft and round with skin suffused with pink, as if she has just come from a steaming kitchen. As the band plays, she smoothes wisps of her daughter's hair back into a bun. When the child begins to rock, thrusting into the music again, again, the mother brightens like one who sees sunlight after months of rain. She smiles gently and squats

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beside the unnoticing child to pat her hand. "You like that, don't you?" she says softly. "You like that."

At the intersection of South Avenue and West Market, a clerk stands outside the Disney Store, beckoning. The place is almost impassible but I push gently in. I make my way slowly to the back, where a scene from *Beauty and the Beast* plays on the big screen. We move like cattle on a worn path, past stacks of Little Mermaid placemats, statues of Pinocchio and Cruella DeVille, racks of Aladdin barrettes and Cinderella fashion dolls, Donald Duck hats and blue Genie watches. Mickey Mouse is everywhere, on ties, brooches, jump ropes, golf balls, toothbrushes that talk. At the back of the store, beneath the big screen, is a sort of throne scene: Mickey and Minnie propped in the center of a huge pile of stuffed animals like ancestors atop a family tree. Scattered around the famous rodents are their anthropomorphic offspring: dwarves and dalmatians, flounder and crickets, skinny pigs and big-eared elephants, pink crustaceans and children who never grow up.

A young woman in a Goofy sweatshirt wanders past. Her boyfriend is close behind her, walking in tandem.

"Buy something," he urges.

"But I don't know what to buy," she moans. "And you don't want anything." They turn left, toward the door. The boyfriend's palm is on the small of her back, pushing.

I am taking notes about a lunch box shaped like Mickey's head when a female voice interrupts. "Making a Christmas list?" A clerk stands next to me, peering at my page. It looks like no one's Christmas list, a sprawl of product names and snatches of conversation. She gives up and looks at me. "Looking for anything special?" Like all the clerks in the Disney Store, this one looks like a Mousketeer without the saucer ears or the full curves that helped Annette Funicello graduate to beach-party films. My clerk is pale, slender, pleasant, with long, wavy brown hair, white socks and sneakers, a pleated skirt and a cardigan with a blocky M on the left pocket. The costume says Family Entertainment. It says Good, Clean Fun.

I feel sheepish, as if caught spraying graffiti on Cinderella's castle. I turn to a blank page in my notebook and tell her of my nine-year-old nephew with cerebral palsy. She leads me to a rack of plastic tumblers with straws that pop up when the lids are turned. I choose one. Between the double wall of plastic is a scene from *Aladdin* sealed in a film of water. When I shake it, a dozen tiny lanterns float past.

"It'll keep his interest," she promises. "And it won't look like he needs a special cup. Even teenagers like them."

I buy the cup. My nephew will like it. I like it too. But I am embarrassed. The plastic Mickey Mouse bag hanging from my wrist marks the difference between an idealized asceticism, where we take only what is studied and necessary and beautiful, and the reality of

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mass consumption, where we choose what is clever, affordable and promises some kind of pleasure.

How did Veblen handle Christmas? He didn't say. For all his books, he was intensely private and left few personal papers. Perhaps his resentment of "devout observances" and lack of children allowed him to ignore the whole business. But he too had nieces and nephews. Perhaps he gave only sensible things—underwear and thick socks. He built chairs and a cabin for himself, so perhaps he used his carpentry skills to make clever toys from scraps of wood. Or perhaps, as one who admired innovation, he too would buy a cup suited to a boy with trembling hands.

When my family visited at Thanksgiving, it was the mall's size and variety that impressed them. My father could play miniature golf with my sons. My mother could shop for clothes with my sister. Another sister could take her young son to bounce in the inflated Snoopy or sit on Santa's lap. In the food court, one person could eat hot dogs, another pizza, a third egg foo yung. Another family with yet more far-flung tastes used a cellular phone to keep track of one another.

Today, I brought a sandwich. As I sit on a metal bench and eat it, the gesture seems small and cranky, the sort my tightwad neighbor would indulge. I have not Veblen's stamina for separateness. I keep stumbling from the mountaintop to see what's happening down below.

A crowd has gathered at the benches outside Glamour Shots. They are men and women, mostly older, and a few weary children, staring through a wall of glass at plain women, plump women, women like your neighbor or your sister or your deskmate being transformed into versions of the big-eyed, big-haired, high-colored female, the lounge singer, NFL cheerleader, game-show assistant.

"Our sense of costliness often masquerades under the name of beauty," Veblen wrote. "We readily and for the most part, with utter sincerity, find those things pleasing that are in vogue." He inveighed against the corsets and hoop skirts of his day. By hobbling women and making them merely ornamental, such fashions made them the chattel of men, he pointed out. Fashions have changed. The ornamental emphasis on women has not. Every makeup counter sells larger eyes, fuller lips, higher cheekbones than nature produced. Glamour Shots sells a bigger package, a foxier look preserved on film. "Before to After—only 2 hours," the sign says. I settle on the bench to watch.

On the other side of the glass, three women sit in chairs before huge mirrors framed with light bulbs. They wear black smocks over black tube tops and businesslike expressions. Each has paid $29.95 to be worked over by a stylist wielding curling iron and hair spray, pots of blush and tubes of eyeliner. They will pay more for photos. After her hair is teased and her cheeks rouged, each woman will choose a

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sequined jacket from a rack, costume jewelry from a chest and disappear into a darkened studio. Right now, on the monitor above our heads, a young woman with short hair and a flashbulb smile mugs in a fur stole, then a sequined dress, then a Twins uniform. Each time the shutter snaps, the moment appears on a second screen, preserved on film. The screen makes private fantasy into public entertainment.

In one chair behind the glass sits a plump woman of about thirty with walnut-colored skin and the straight, glossy hair of a Native American. Her daughter, who is about six and wears her hair in pigtails, squirms on the next chair. The child too wears a black smock and waits her turn at dress-up. The grandmother, a short, round woman with gray hair pulled into a bun, sits on the bench next to me. The child beckons her to the glass and pushes a bobbypin through the crack where two panels meet. The old woman takes it, nodding, understanding that the child will need it later, when the hairspray has lost its force. Perhaps she knows too that the child who waits for curls and sequins and rouged lips needs connection with the plain, the patient, the ordinary.

Another woman, big and young, emerges from the studio with cascades of blonde curls falling to her bare shoulders. In the bright light, she is suddenly shy and holds her hand modestly to her chest. As she and her boyfriend look at proofs and point to the photos they want, she removes the large earrings and rubs her earlobes. The choices made, she puts on her T-shirt and jean jacket and they return to the mall. In the blue shadow of fluorescent light, she looks garish, like Christmas colors out of season.

As beauty is lure to America's women, sports is to its men. The Megamall offers sports bars, sports videos, sporting goods and sportswear. There is a mall-walking club and a miniature golf course. Shoppers can buy sneakers with high tops and air cushions and turquoise laces, chocolate wrapped as soccer balls and chips-and-dip bowls shaped like football helmets. One shop sells baseballs signed by men who played in the stadium that formerly stood on the Megamall site. A Rod Carew goes for $79.95. Many stores have televisions mounted on the wall so that patrons can drink or shop without missing a play.

Veblen was no ivory-tower wimp. One summer, he explored much of Norway by bicycle. But he had the farmboy's rich disdain for pretensions, especially the "rant and swagger and ostensible mystification" he found in sports like football and hunting. Too much fondness for sports "marks an arrested development in man's moral nature," he wrote. How he would goggle at America's Original Sports Bar in the Megamall. You enter as through a vestibule, past a case holding scuffed shoes and soiled jerseys, relics of Famous Players in Big Games. Suddenly, you are in a dark, cavernous room dotted with pools of reverent light. One of them illumines a huge trophy of plastic

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or Styrofoam, painted matte silver and suspended over the bar like a fetish. Another light reveals two men hunched over a pool table, calculating angles. On the far wall are a dozen vigilant television screens showing football games past or present. One offers a jumble of shoulder pads, buttocks and turf—the player's view. It is an electronic game that allows one to make a play without risk of torn cartilage or spilled beer. A sign explains: "Virtuality—Experience Illusion Fusion."

Here, by adulation or electronic simulation, we can all be athletes. There is no rant and swagger. Neither is there sign of a collective life. One pale, fat man wearing shorts and a T-shirt sits on the top row of a small bleacher. Alone in the dark, he sips beer and watches athletes collide on a big screen.

On the first floor, there is Santa's house, with walls lacquered red as a candied apple and a winding lane of restless children, waiting their turn at the old man's ear. As I pass by, the blonde child in the wheelchair has her chance. Her chair has been pulled alongside Santa's to face the camera. Her father sits at her feet, trying to coax a smile. But the child has withdrawn deep inside herself and is calmly impassive. Santa's rouged cheeks and her father's words cannot reach her as the music did. I feel for the father, longing for proof of his child's pleasure. And yet I admire the girl who has not learned to fake happiness. Without the capacity to dissemble, she holds out for real pleasure.

Before I leave, I climb to a balcony that overlooks the mall's central atrium. Above is a roof of crimped glass. Below are Camp Snoopy with its whirling rides, potted trees and towering balloon of Charlie Brown's dog. It is a god's view, or a pigeon's, and it is pleasant. The calliope's shrill music is muted by distance. Silverware clinks agreeably at a nearby restaurant. The carnival colors brighten the winter grayness. The risen air feels warmed and softened by prior use.

Perhaps it is the sticky smell of caramel corn or the arcade's gaudy lights that reminds me of the state fair. But no, that's different. That is twelve days in late August and early September when ordinary people's jams and gladiola and green beans share the stage with Dolly Parton and U.S. senators. Because it is fleeting, because each participant has taken great care in the cake she made or the chicken he raised, the ordinary becomes exceptional.

At the Megamall, the fair goes on year-round. It is never closed for the season. It never moves to another town. It is a fixture, a business, not a celebration.

My mind flashes to the scene in *Pinocchio* where the truant boys take a coach to Pleasure Island. After they have sickened themselves with sweets, exhausted themselves on rides and broken every window, they turn brutish in form as well as manner. All but Pinocchio are turned

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into pack mules for the salt mines. He alone escapes by leaping into the sea. But his mulish tail and ears remain until he is redeemed by his own shame and Gepetto's love.

I think of Thorstein Veblen, still attended to long after his death because his originality and conviction endure. I try to envision the Megamall a century hence and see nothing. Born of novelty and consumption, it seems likely to be devoured by the same.

But the Megamall dwells in the pulse of the present, not the lessons of history or the dreams of the future. Across the atrium from where I stand, the roller coaster's track dips and curves like a barn swallow. Just now, a train full of flushed riders climbs, swerves, tilts on its side, then plunges on the rail's fixed flight through the park. The riders raise their arms and scream. They are excited and terrified as they hurtle unthinking through time.

LYNDA MCDONNELL

Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

In expressing my immense gratitude for David Dooley's very gratifying review of my book *A Place at the Table* (Spring 1994 issue), I would like to correct a couple of mistaken impressions. (1) I'm not a political conservative; I'm a political moderate. (2) I don't object to all gay organizations. Mr. Dooley makes special mention of P-FLAG, Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Mr. Dooley's impression to the contrary, I have the highest respect for P-FLAG, which has been a vital force for good in the lives of countless gay people and their families and friends.

New York, New York Bruce Bawer

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THE HEADHUNTER
by Uwe Timm

Translated from the German by Peter Tegel
New Directions; $22.95

"This is a meditation on money by an extraordinary storyteller; an allegory with the earmarks of a suspense thriller; and a curious life story in which rooting for the hero ultimately means you hope he gets caught. . . . Above all, the author offers cliffhanger after cliffhanger, until you can't believe he can possibly come up with another. While the book is quite long (four hundred pages)—and covers territory from gambling to cannibalism, from Europe to Easter Island—it isn't long enough to tell you everything it makes you want to know."—*The New Yorker*

"The second of German author Timm's five novels to be translated into English (*The Snake Tree*, 1990) gleefully targets everything we love to hate about the 1980's—heartless greed, financial speculation, yuppie food faddists, overpriced doctors, artists with inflated reputations and bank accounts to match. Timm writes with a gusto and an abundance of earthy anecdote reminiscent of Saul Bellow in his vital youth. . . . Witty asides, mini-lectures on the nature of capitalism, the failure of socialism, the fetishistic appeal of coin and paper money, and 'chaos ideology' round out this comic, disabused fantasia on themes from *das Kapital*. Marx would have cracked a grudging smile."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"*Headhunter* by Uwe Timm, already a smashing success in Germany, appears here in a deft, playful translation by Peter Tegel . . . Timm is a German Harold Pinter, a prose dramatist of the side of modern life that deals with the making and getting and shifting of great sums of money. He explores a realm in which sweet language becomes cash becomes love-making. *Headhunter* is an innocent book that no American could write, burdened as we are with Protestant anxiety around the making of money. We must read and envy. . . ."—*Washington Post Book World*

"'Headhunter,' like Tom Wolfe's 'Bonfire of the Vanities,' is a meditation on the anthropological meaning of '80s financial wheeler-dealering; like Don DeLillo's 'White Noise,' it's a reflection on the mystery of life, language and computerized banking systems. . . . fresh, quirky, unexpected and illuminating. . . ."—Bruce Bawer, *The Wall Street Journal*

"This fast moving, engrossing narrative about an international financial swindler on the lam, contemplating the lost culture of Easter Island, becomes a compelling meditation on the greed and fiscal irresponsibility, a subtle indictment of human values awash. . . . A page turner that haunts long after it is put down."—*The Reader's Review*

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DEAN ALBARELLI

Passengers

The first time I saw my father-in-law with his girlfriend was in a little diner at Malletts Bay, the two of them holding hands at a corner table overlooking the marina. He didn't see us come in, and I managed to push Margaret back out the door.

"What? What's wrong?" she said.

"Nell's father—at the far table in there."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "Did he see you?"

"I don't think so." As far as I could tell, he'd been too focused on his own companion to notice.

We got back to her car and Margaret sat looking at me with her hands on the wheel. "Second thoughts?"

I shook my head. "You?"

"Not yet," she said. She started the car up and pulled onto the road.

I glanced back at the restaurant.

"We'll just go to my place," she said, adjusting the rearview mirror. "I've got some pesto and stuff in the fridge."

Margaret had an apartment in town, but she and a girlfriend—another physical therapist—were renting a cottage at Porter's Point for the summer. We'd only known each other a month or so. I'd stepped out of the pilothouse in the rain one night and slipped on the short ladder to the deck. The next day I met Margaret in the orthopedic outpatient clinic. Someone had given me something for the pain and I was pretty woozy, lying with my chin on the edge of the examining table, blurrily examining the only thing I could see, which happened to be Margaret's long legs in white stockings. "You've got a run," I heard myself say.

She laughed. "Why?"

"I don't know," I said, "you just do."

She'd been probing at the area around my spine, her fingers pushing now and then at the muscle just above my hip. "You want me to stop?"

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I shrugged. "No. Why?"

"Why did you say I have to run?"

"Your stocking," I said. "Has . . . a . . . run."

Her laugh was quirky and girlish, a little shriek which she quickly reined in, setting her warm palm flat on my shoulder.

When she finished she wrote several notes on a form sheet, clipping it to an unimaginative and embarrassingly childlike "pain drawing" I'd been asked to make. My rendering of a spine looked like a zipper; the flashes of pain I'd penned in resembled porcupine quills emerging from the simple figure's left hip.

"You'll have to go easy on your back for a while," she said. "Good thing you do your job standing, because chair-sitting's definitely out."

It must have been the Percodan speaking, because in six years of marriage I'd never strayed, never even indulged in heavy flirtation. "If I live," I said, "maybe I can lie you bunch sometime—I mean buy you lunch." I was too drugged to be embarrassed. I just laughed.

"You'll live," she said, "but I've already been lied to a bunch."

Later, though, as I was heading towards the lobby, she walked up beside me and spoke quietly. "Ask me sometime when you're not all drugged up and I might accept."

A week later I stopped back. Between the Percodan and the pain, I hadn't registered the fact that we weren't exactly contemporaries, though I dimly remembered the few stray greys sprinkled through her chestnut hair. She did a sort of double take as she greeted me in the waiting area, and I instantly regretted the fact that just that morning I'd shaved two days of stubble from my face. (Clean-shaven, I was still carded by bartenders.) We went ahead with lunch, though, and soon enough the fourteen-year gap didn't seem to make a lot of difference.

"You think Janice'll be there?" I asked. We were almost at the cottage.

"I didn't think of that. She could be, it's her day off. Sure you want to face her?"

Janice was the housemate. She was a little younger than Margaret, and had been perfectly nice to me the first week I

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was around, until Margaret told her I was married. After that it was icicles.

We turned off the dirt road at Porter's Point, and it looked as though Janice's car was gone. The cottage was situated on a small ledge, with the lake right there below us and cedar trees obscuring the place from the road. I walked to the fence at the cliff's edge, and could see that about eight miles to the south, towards town, the number two boat was starting off for New York.

Inside, Margaret opened a couple of beers. I eased into a wicker chair and adjusted the sticky cling of the back brace she'd fitted me with. It was stuffy inside, and Margaret began sliding windows open; glancing up, I noticed the pale, tender skin of her neatly shaved underarm, which for a moment made her seem oddly delicate. I had the unremarkable thought: she's someone's daughter. She was a tall, outdoorsy-looking woman, with a sprinkling of freckles across her forehead that came and went with days spent in the sun. She'd just turned thirty-seven, which she was a little sensitive about, though it was easy to see she'd attract the flirtations of tongue-tied patients for many years to come.

"Hungry?" she said.

"Not really." I stood up and tugged at the brace once more, but it still felt unnatural. On the wall near the sofa there was a poster-size chart of North American flowers, with capsule histories and various symbolic associations: marigolds and grief, daisies and innocence. I'd never paid much attention to flowers, but I knew Margaret had an ambitious garden in town. Nell tended our own modest garden, and though it was pretty, it seemed to me, aside from the vegetable yield, to be basically futile and boring. "Haven't really had much of an appetite lately," I said.

"My fault?" She settled on the couch.

"Yes, but I think it's a compliment."

"Ah, Michael, you're so suave." She tapped her sandal against my leg. "How's your back?"

"This brace is a pain in the ass."

"It's supposed to go around your waist."

"Har-dee-har," I said, and I stretched out on the sofa with my head on her leg. We hadn't slept together, though things had

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gotten rather moist a few nights before. Her age intimidated me a bit, and when it didn't, she'd often throw up polite little roadblocks. I wasn't expecting a lot more than lunch just now, because I had to be back in town for the number two boat when it returned. It was just a T-Class vessel, twenty cars maximum, which I'd been operating since March. I had to watch my step because they'd never had a skipper under thirty before, and there was a big to-do about letting a twenty-three-year-old into the wheelhouse, even the son of a four-bar man. Still, by late summer the thrill had begun to wear off, and sometimes I was tempted just to break off course and zigzag through the islands, take the whole boatload of strangers on an unexpected tour of the lake.

Only a couple of months earlier, I'd happily envisioned myself up in the wheelhouse the rest of my working life, but I knew now that that was an unlikely scenario. Still, it was much better than deckhand work, which I'd done almost every summer since I was sixteen.

My back was throbbing, and I rolled onto my side, face to face with Margaret's thigh clad in loose linen shorts. Feeling for the shorts' cuffed hem, I rubbed at the tight muscled skin just above her knee, noticing the line of blondish hairs where her shaving ended.

"You shouldn't lie on your side," she said, and I nodded, dipping my head and running my tongue along her wrist. I remember wondering, exactly what is it I'm after here? Not, I was certain, a mother figure, certain obvious facts notwithstanding. So what then? Sex? Love? Friendship? Diversion?

I was a little confused, I suppose, maybe in need of a good couch session, though the one in progress seemed as likely a therapy as any. I slid my hand a little further along Margaret's bronze thigh.

After a moment she pulled my hand away and held my fingers to her mouth. "Who was Nell's father with earlier?"

"A woman," I said, still a little surprised.

"Not Nell's mother?"

"No."

"Does that bother you?"

I shrugged, shook my head. "No."

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She sipped at her beer, gazing at me over the glass. "Right."

Nell picked me up at the dock after the last crossing that night. She'd left Ethan napping at her parents' house, and brought a shirt and jeans for me, thinking I might want to go out for dinner, but I was too tired. Or at least I said I was. The more time I spent with Margaret, and the more I thought about her, the more I became annoyed around Nell and wanted to avoid being alone with her.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

"No. Back's giving me a little trouble," I lied.

"Your driving exam's Friday," she said. "Should we cancel it?"

"No, why?—you think I'm gonna blow it again?"

"Of course not. I'm just thinking of your back. You drive fine."

That was a generous exaggeration. I watched her a moment, admiring the way she casually held the steering wheel in the fingers of her left hand, her elbow resting on the door. The fact was, I didn't like cars, and I didn't drive very well, either. It should have been simple after piloting the ferry, and among the crew it was considered a laugh riot that I had a license for one and not the other, but I still didn't like getting out on the road with other drivers. Occasionally I would, but I only had a learner's permit, so it was illegal to drive alone. Lately, I'd been doing that more often, mainly to visit Margaret, but Nell kept reminding me our rates would go sky high if the insurance company ever found out, which was a considerately subtle way of saying "accident."

She leaned over to tune the radio to a song I didn't recognize, and watching her sing along with furrowed eyebrows, her lips silently enunciating, I caught a glimpse of Becca, my younger sister. They'd always looked a little alike—ringlety hair, the same sort of straight Roman nose and high cheekbones—which I think was the first thing that made me think I'd like Nell. She was working a summer concession near the lakefront at the time, and between crossings I'd buy frozen yogurt from her. By the fall we were seeing each other steadily, then on and off in the winter, when one of my friends started asking her out. I knew that a few times they'd gone dancing or to movies. It

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wasn't till then, though, that I realized I'd begun to feel possessive about her. And it occurred to me that maybe we shouldn't be so on-and-off casual about things after all. At the time—we were both seventeen—I thought that maybe if I turned the heat up a little, if we began sleeping together, I could clear the deck of any interlopers.

I had the house to myself one weekend about this time, because my parents had driven Becca and a couple of friends to a swim meet in New York. When I woke up Sunday morning, hours after Nell had snuck home, I could hear my older brother and his wife, who lived outside of town, talking quietly in the kitchen. I went downstairs and noticed a small pile of jewelry on the dining room table: my parents' watches and wedding bands, my mother's half-dozen silver Navajo bracelets, a brass and copper bangle I'd given to Becca on her thirteenth birthday.

A thud of panic hit me, and though I instantly knew the gist of what had happened, I also made myself not know. The next ten or twenty seconds were a sea of possibilities, and during that odd stretch of time before anyone spoke, I resisted the logic of what I saw on the table. When I walked into the kitchen, my sister-in-law looked at me strangely, her eyes raw from crying. The car, somewhere in upstate New York, had been sideswiped on an icy stretch of interstate, rolling down an embankment and falling through shallow ice at the edge of Lake George. One of Becca's friends survived, though she lost her leg, a girl I still see downtown sometimes.

Nell spent most of the next few months staying at my house. And though we slept in the same bed, we seemed for a short time to have forgotten about sex. Sex hadn't forgotten us, though, because eight weeks later we learned she was pregnant with Ethan.

He was asleep on the sofa when we got to her parents' house. Jack and Louise were sitting in the kitchen eating ice cream, arguing quietly about Jack's vacation week.

"We'll talk about it later," he said, looking weary. He crumpled his napkin and smiled apologetically at us, a thin handsome man in his early fifties.

"If you'd told me, though, I'd have remembered," Louise

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said. "I'd have taken the week off myself. Nell, did you know Dad was taking next week off?"

Before Nell could answer, the pager clipped to Jack's belt went off, and everyone stopped talking while he wrote on a napkin the number being repeated through heavy static. "Excuse me," he said, and went to use the phone in his study, squeezing my shoulder as he walked past. He came back out a few minutes later with a jacket on. "I've got to make a house call," he said, "shouldn't be too long."

I glanced at him, wondering. He stood lighting his pipe and gazed directly back at me for a moment. "Are we still on for Sunday, Michael?" He'd asked earlier in the week if I could *borrow my brother's truck to help him move some furniture*, not that I'd be of any use lifting.

Louise dabbed at a spot of ice cream on her pant leg. "I don't think we want that stuff here, Jack. You can give it to the Salvation Army."

"What do you mean," he said, "it's nice furniture. Nell and Michael might be able to use some of it."

"I'd like to know where you're planning to *store* all of it," Louise said.

"I don't know, in the carriage house for now. It's nice stuff."

Louise looked at us and made a dubious expression. Their relationship, in the six years I'd known them, was generally one of respectful discord. I tended to think of Jack as the more reasonable and sympathetic of the two—Louise was unrelentingly contrary in his presence—but now I wondered if she didn't have her reasons.

"Well, whatever," Jack said, and he kissed Nell on the forehead before leaving.

I went to the living room to get Ethan, who was sprawled across the sofa with his mouth open. Without thinking, I bent over to lift him, but before I could get my arms beneath him my back locked and I let out an involuntary groan that woke him with a start. He covered his face, then said slowly, "Dad?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oh." He closed his eyes again.

"Nice to see you too." I sat down on the sofa, combing my fingers through the silky strands of his blond bangs all plastered to his forehead with sweat.

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"Did you see Champ today?" he asked, his eyes still closed. The latest fixture in his fantasy life was the Lake Champlain Monster, a creature reportedly sighted several times in recent months and thought by many to be the poor relation of Scotland's aquatic celebrity.

"Yeah, I did, but only from a distance. A lot of people had cameras on the boat, and you know how shy he is."

"What was he doing?"

"Oh, just sort of swimming around. Poking his head out now and then."

"Mmm," he said sleepily. "Why don't you take a picture of him?"

"Oh, he doesn't like that, Ethan. He's really a very private sort of guy."

"But I don't think he'd mind if *you* took it."

"Well, I don't always know when I'm going to see him. And I can't leave the helm to go take a picture."

"Mmm," he said. "Mom said maybe it's a girl."

"What!"

"Champ might not be a boy."

"Oh."

"I'm pretty sure he is," he said. "Unless there's more than one. Maybe there's a whole family." And he was out again.

I drove on the way home, already nervous about Friday's exam. At the first traffic light Nell shifted in her seat and looked at me. "I don't know what it is, but you seem a little strange tonight. Lately, in fact. Something you're not telling me?"

"No, I'm just trying to concentrate on the road." There was, in fact, more traffic than I felt comfortable with.

"Everything go okay on the boat?"

"Uh-huh."

"How's that new kid working out?"

"Nelson? Don't ask. Dave calls him 'Admiral.' "

"Did he get rid of the Walkman?"

"Reluctantly." I switched the high beams on. "Kid's a trip. Oh yeah, I meant to tell you, a seagull flew smack into one of the wheelhouse windows this morning. Shattered it. I could hardly see out the port side, had to have Nelson come up and tap the glass out."

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She squinted. "Did the seagull . . . ?"

"Yes, but I'm sure it never knew what happened. Scared the crap out of me, though. I took the boat off course without even realizing. Anyway, after Nelson finishes up he says, 'Well, I'm going down to the cellar to give Dave a hand.' "

"The *cellar*?" she laughed. "Was he serious?"

"Yes. So I told him: you can go below, or you can go down to the engine room, but there's no fucking cellar on this boat." I glanced at Ethan on the back seat. "Is he out?"

"Yes, but please watch it. He got frustrated over something this morning and started muttering 'Sun in the bitch' to himself."

I laughed. "Sorry."

We drove in silence for a minute. "By the way," she said quietly, and she glanced back at Ethan again.

"Yeah?"

A car approached, and the driver flashed his high beams on and off. Nell said calmly, "You're blinding him, Michael, take your brights off."

I dimmed the lights and held tight to the wheel until the other car had passed. "What?"

"This is kind of a strange thing to ask, but have you ever wondered if my father might be seeing someone? I mean, another woman?"

I felt my throat tighten and my face redden in the dark. "I don't know—why?"

She shrugged. "It's just, I picked up the phone to call the sitter earlier this evening, and I didn't realize Dad was on. And I heard this woman saying—in a very affectionate tone—something like '. . . already missing you . . . ,' and right away Dad said 'I'm on the phone!' and I hung up. Mom was out getting groceries."

"I don't know," I said. "Could be a patient. His patients love him."

"Maybe. You're driving too close to the shoulder. Maybe," she said.

"Does it bother you?" I asked.

She thought for a moment. "I don't even know if it's so. I hope not. But I think it would bother me more if Mom was doing it to him."

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"Really?" I glanced at her.

"Just because she gives him so much crap."

"But you think it's okay for him?"

"Well, not okay, no. I don't know. They're weird. I just think it's a different set of rules for them now." She shrugged. "Whereas if you ever started stepping out with someone, you'd be in very deep water."

"I think that's 'hot' water."

"You'd be in very deep hot water."

I went ahead with the driving exam on Friday, passed by just one point, and stood waiting with Nell in a room full of sixteen-year-olds while a state trooper filled out a temporary license for me. He glanced at my shoulder boards and name tag afterwards and smiled. "Hope you're a little better at driving the ferryboat."

I was already embarrassed and couldn't help being a prick. "You don't drive a boat," I said, "boats are piloted."

His smile disappeared. "Whatever," he said, and he shoved the forms at me.

Saturday night Nell and I had some words about something stupid, unwashed dishes I think, and in no time it escalated into an argument that I welcomed, even provoked, I'm ashamed to say, as an opportunity to storm out of the house.

When I got to the cottage, Janice came to the door, all dressed up and behaving in a surprisingly civil manner. She gave me a sort of amused smile, asking if I'd happened to notice whether her car was blocked. Inside I discovered the source of her amusement: a rugged and mustachioed guy about forty wearing a blue polo shirt and seersucker pants—a suburban Marlboro man perched in the wicker chair. Janice's date, I hoped, but already I knew better. Margaret was nearby, kneeling over some pieces of fabric on the floor. She looked a little surprised and stood up smiling. "Well! I'm very popular all of a sudden." She was wearing her bathing suit—a red one-piece number like the local lifeguards wore—with an unbuttoned work shirt. I glanced at the guy in the chair, who smiled and smoothed his mustache as if waiting to see what would develop here.

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"Sorry," I said, "I should have called. Bad time to stop by?"

"No, of course not," she said, "come on in." She had a thin layer of green sunblock on her nose and looked as if she'd been outside all day.

Janice stood in the kitchen doorway, running a piece of dental floss through her teeth while Margaret introduced me to Jerry. He was an architect and a friend of her ex-husband.

Hygienic Janice, clearly relishing my sudden awkwardness, emerged from the kitchen with a sweater around her shoulders. "Wish I could stay and visit, but I'm already late. Good night, men," she sang out, giving a certain emphasis to the last word that she no doubt considered witty. Margaret rolled her eyes and went to get me a beer.

"So, Michael, are you in school?" Jerry asked.

"No," I said, "I work for LCT."

"Oh, really, on the ferry?"

I nodded. "The *Ethan Allen* mostly."

"I did that for a summer back in high school."

I wasn't sure whether or not "back in high school" was a slight. From the kitchen Margaret called out, "Yes, Jerry, but you were a deckhand, I think; Michael's a captain now."

"Really?" he asked, looking at me again.

"One bar," I said, holding a limp finger up. "And only on the small boats."

"Still, they were all older guys when I was there."

"It's kind of a new crowd. Not just guys anymore, either. Just got our first woman skipper."

He mentioned the names of several captains he'd worked for, and it turned out he'd known my father.

"I saw in the paper where a whole wedding party spotted Champ recently," he said. "That wasn't your boat, was it?"

"No, unfortunately. They chartered one of the big boats."

"So you think they really saw something?"

"I don't doubt it."

"Maybe," he said.

Margaret came back with my beer and a bowl of pretzels. She'd pulled a pair of jeans on and wiped the chalk from her nose. "Sounded convincing to me," she said.

Because of Ethan's new passion, I'd recently read a book on

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the subject, and I mentioned that Samuel de Champlain and his Abnaki guides had described a similar creature in 1609.

Jerry nodded. "Be pretty weird to be the only one of a species left behind like that," he said. "What do you do for a social life? You'd have to start hanging out with other kinds of fish." He laughed.

I nodded. "Or spend your life looking for your own kind."

"They think the one at Loch Ness has offspring, though," Margaret said. "Or a partner at least. Anyway, they think there's more than one there."

"Well that's a little better," Jerry said. "Still sounds grim."

We each had another beer, and by ten o'clock I was thinking about leaving, convinced that Jerry was settled in for a long visit. But then he rose to his feet and said he had to be up early to play tennis.

I got up to shake his hand, and Margaret walked him out to the steps, giving him a neutral sort of kiss. I wandered back to look at the pieces of fabric she'd spread all over the floor. The one time I'd been to her apartment in town, she'd shown me several quilts she'd made. And Janice, before she learned I was an unfaithful wretch, had mentioned there were others at a gallery in Middlebury.

Margaret came back in and set her hand on my shoulder. "What do you think of those colors—a little too busy?"

"No, I like the blue," I said.

"You like everything blue," she said, flicking at my navy T-shirt. "What about the design?"

"D'you already get Jerry's opinion?"

"Michael, you're not going to do that to me, are you?"

"Okay, I'm not. But did you?"

"No. And he only arrived an hour before you got here." She sighed loudly. "What am I doing," she said, "justifying him to you—you with a wife and son at home. You're really something, you know that, Michael?"

"Okay, I'm sorry. Forget it. What were you asking me?"

"The design. What's it look like to you? What do you see?"

"Is this supposed to be a Rorschach quilt or something? An inkblot blanket?"

She shook her head, grudgingly curling a weary smile. "Forget it." She took my beer and drank from it.

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"Okay, okay, I'm thinking." I leaned over. "Actually, it looks like pinwheels."

"Oh, *now* we're getting somewhere," she said. "Very revealing." She pulled the square back a little. "Now what's it look like?"

"Still pinwheels. Maybe a bunch of windmills, I don't know. A real sickie would say that one's sort of a backwards swastika. I'll stick with the pinwheels."

"Look at the whole thing, not just the pieces."

I stepped back, squinting, and all at once the center image appeared, its outline emerging from the margins of the other shapes. "A yellow, um, rose."

"Got the color right."

"Tulip."

"Very good," she said. "Trace of arrested development on shape identification, but he's got his primary colors down."

I glanced at the chart above the sofa. "So, yellow tulip. Symbolic of . . . ?"

"Well," and she winced. "Hopeless love, as a matter of fact."

"Hopeless love, wonderful, is that tonight's aphrodisiac?"

"No, that's tonight's quilt project," she said, and she kissed my mouth wetly. I could smell coconut sunscreen on her, and began maneuvering us towards the sofa.

"Wait," she said, "wait, I've been crouching over that quilt all night, I need some air."

It was cooler down on the beach. We strolled arm in arm past several small groups seated around bonfires: a nagging fat woman with kids in pajamas roasting marshmallows, couples drinking beer and staring after us.

Down by the point there was a rubber life raft at the bottom of a long stairway, and I went to untie it.

"What are you doing?" she said. "It's *dark* out there," but she was slowly rolling her pant legs up.

I had the brace on, and my rowing was stiff and awkward. Margaret leaned back against the other end with her long legs dangled over mine. "I hope you realize it's stupid to do this with your back," she said.

"Should I try it without my back?"

"You should try *going* back. Or else let me row."

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"I'll be careful. Anyway, if I get laid-up I'll have a great excuse to spend the night."

"Forget it," she said, "you're not getting laid *or* laid-up."

I rowed a few more strokes, watching her. "You know," I said slowly, "there's a name for women who—"

"Frigid? Are you trying to tell me I'm frigid, Michael?" Beneath the serious tone there was vague evidence of a smile.

"No, that wasn't the one I had in mind."

"Cock tease?"

I nodded.

"You know," she said slowly, "there's a name for an amorous guy with a wife and kid at home."

"Yeah?"

"Red bet," she said, "it's a banking term. It means bad credit risk. You, Michael, are a red bet. Neon red."

I continued rowing and snorted as we stared at each other. "What's the big risk—your maidenhead?"

She poked me in the chest with her foot. We were out a good ways now, the water almost placid, and I stowed the plastic oars against Margaret's thighs. Someone rang a bell outside one of the cottages, a signal for their child to come in. I took Margaret's foot and set it in my lap. "Sasquatch," I said, examining her long slender toes.

She wrinkled her eyebrows in mock annoyance. "Don't look at my big feet."

She did have big feet, almost as long as my own, though they had a certain delicacy. "I like them," I said. Her toes, when she stretched them, had the odd knack of splaying wide apart. I fit my fingers in between each of them and squeezed. "I'm holding hands with your feet, Margaret."

"You're very weird," she said.

"You're very pretty."

"You're very seductive."

She flexed her toes and we were quiet for a bit, just drifting. Further out a motor boat roared past, and in a little while its waves were rolling beneath us, making the raft see-saw.

"Careful," she said, "there's a reef over there."

I managed to turn us about with a deft little maneuver I hoped Margaret might admire, but she was plucking distractedly at one of the circular rubber oarlocks. By the time I stowed

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the oars again she was resting her head on the billowed edge of the raft.

"Where do you think this'll end up? " she asked finally.

"Us?"

"Yes. I mean, last week you told me things weren't that bad at home, and then yesterday you tell me you love me."

"You don't believe me?"

"I b*elieve* you," she said, the words coming out in a puff of exasperation. "I believe you. But you can't have both of us, you know."

I nodded once, but it was fully dark now, and I wasn't sure she could see me. "I know that." I also knew that treating Nell the way I was—the only way I seemed able to deal with her lately—couldn't continue much longer. "What if I left Nell?" I said, vaguely aware that the question was as much for me as for Margaret.

"Do you want to?"

"I want to be with you."

"That's not much of an answer."

"Okay," I said, "I'm not looking forward to telling them. But I do want to be with you."

She touched my calf where it rested against her. "You know, even if that's not how things end up, you're not bound by something that happened in high school."

I'd tried that on for size recently, but it seemed like a forced fit. Hearing Margaret now, it felt a little more comfortable. I leaned back and dropped my arms in the water, staring at the low constellation of lights back in town. "No," I said, "I guess not." And I tried to picture a life in this town with Margaret. The two of us. And Ethan, of course, one way or another. Nell would despise me. I'd lose a family all over again, Jack and Louise.

Margaret was now working her foot up the loose leg of my shorts. I squirmed a little, and she pressed on. "Don't tell me you're ticklish. Relax," she said, "you're going to drown us," and in a little while I began slowly growing against the soft probing touch of her toes. I was slow to think of reciprocating, but once I did she began pushing back against my careful rubbing foot, her head lolling on the raft. Her own foot slacked off, and every few seconds I heard a quick expulsion of breath.

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I kept trying to estimate our little craft's potential for grander activities, but it seemed unlikely, even apart from my back.

By the time we reached shore, the only other people on the beach were a few dim figures at a bonfire several hundred yards away. We made a small blanket of our clothes, and I remember thinking, lying in the sand later, that I might as well have been a virgin—twenty-three years old and I felt like I'd just discovered sex. Even so, I'd been unable to bring things to the usual conclusion. What did me in, I think, was that at one point Margaret let out a terrified little yelp, and I thought, *Christ, what have I done?*

Something had bitten her, she said, something under the clothes, but when I reached under and pawed around, it was only a little metal matchbox car, a yellow Checker cab with its tiny sharp trunk stuck open. Margaret quietly cursed the thing, but later tucked it into my shorts, saying I should give it to Ethan. I carried it home, but felt too superstitious to ever pass it along to him.

Driving home that night, I began to realize what it was I was after with Margaret. And it wasn't just sex. Not just sex, or love, or friendship, though it was all of those, too. It sounds silly and juvenile now, but what I wanted, really, was more *life*. The same thing Ethan wanted once he'd mastered the lake's small mysteries of minnows and perch and catfish, and learned there might be something big and rare in those waters. Something more. That's what my son and I wanted that summer.

Sitting at a stoplight I lifted my hand to my face and inhaled coconut—coconut and the salty fish scent of Margaret's sex. I kept breathing the two all the way home.

Sunday afternoon I drove over to my brother's house to take his pickup truck and help Jack. The damn thing felt incredibly wide on the road—an old Chevrolet monster with huge rounded fenders—and I was sorry I'd ever agreed to do this.

"You sure ride the clutch a lot," Jack said after several miles.

"I'm still getting used to this thing. I like our little Nipponese number a lot better."

"I'm just giving you a hard time," he said, scratching at the shadow of whiskers on his chin.

We were headed for Colchester, on the far side of the bay.

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When we got to the Heineberg Bridge, with its lanes the width of bicycle paths, a half-dozen cars were coming from the opposite direction, all of them doing about fifty, close enough to touch as they whizzed past. I slowed to a near crawl, and the driver behind me honked.

"Just ignore him," Jack said. "These people are crazy, driving so fast over this bridge."

My arms locked rigidly into place on either side of the steering wheel until the solid green girders of the bridge sloped to an end, the pavement widened again, and what little traffic there was spread out. Jack toyed with the dial on the radio, but finally switched it off and sat back. "I guess you saw me at the diner out here this week."

I glanced at him and felt my face redden. "Yeah," I said, "I did."

He nodded slightly. "My friend recognized you."

I kept my eyes on the road, waiting.

"I'm not going to lie to you—it was what it looked like," he said. He paused. "Straight through this light here." He'd begun slowly twisting his pipe; every few seconds the stem let out a little squeak. "I hope you don't mind, but that's where we're going now. Clair Coleman's. I think she met you at the house once, years ago."

"That's okay."

We were silent for a minute, just sitting there with it.

"Are you and Nell having problems?"

"No, not really." I waited. "You mean the person *I* was with?"

"Well, I guess there was a woman with you," he said, more question than statement.

I nodded.

"I don't want to make you talk about it," he said, "I'm just concerned."

Driving home the night before, I'd thought it might all be in the open before long. But by the time Nell and I had finished our Sunday morning bed-wrestling match with Ethan, I felt a little less certain. *Red bet.* "It was nothing," I said, "just stupidness. Secret lunch date." I shrugged. "Stupid."

He nodded and mumbled something more or less agreeable sounding, setting his pipe on the dashboard. Then picked it up again. "I'm afraid I'm the one who's been stupid. Clair was just

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a good friend and we . . . " he shrugged, "let things get a little out of hand. Anyway, she's taking a job in Minnesota this month, so . . . there's an end to it at least. That's why we're getting this furniture. Some she doesn't want, the rest I'm gonna store for her."

I nodded.

We were both quiet for a bit and he drummed his fingers softly against the window frame. "Take a left up here," he said finally, pointing with his pipe. "The realtor's sign."

Clair Coleman came around from the backyard in jeans and a patterned Hawaiian shirt, carrying the detached spray nozzle of a garden hose. She was about forty-five, pale-skinned and attractive. She wore a kerchief over dark red hair that may have been natural, but probably had greyed and was hennaed.

She waved at Jack and stopped at my side of the truck as we got out. "Hello, Michael," she said, and held up a pair of muddy palms to show that I wouldn't want to shake her hand. "We met about five years ago. You were occupied with a baby at the time."

I smiled. "Probably so."

Her cheeks and nose were sunburned, and she had a curiously attractive tracheotomy scar, a perfect reddish pink circle centered in the hollow recess of her throat.

Jack came around and briefly set his hand on her shoulder in greeting. She tapped the pistol-like nozzle against his arm and gestured at her garage full of furniture. "You sure Louise won't mind jamming up the carriage house with this stuff?"

He glanced vaguely at it and shook his head once. "It's no problem."

We walked to the garage, which was crammed full of dark, heavy-looking furniture, and suddenly I remembered my back. There were several antique bureaus, a small roll-top desk, and a solid-looking oval table with clawed feet. As if he'd suddenly read my mind, Jack said, "Jesus, Michael, I forgot about your back."

"I'll be fine," I said.

"I can help you lift this stuff," Clair told him. "I got half of it out here alone."

"No, no, I can help," I said, and went to back the truck up.

But Jack insisted I not lift anything, and I didn't argue. He

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and Clair started with the smaller of the bureaus, and I began pulling drawers out of the larger one to lighten it. When I got to the bottom drawer there was a big oval wooden frame with an ancient portrait photograph: a grimly solemn couple in their forties, though at first glance they looked much older. "Did you know this was in here?" I asked Clair.

"Oh, God, my great-grandparents," she said. She cleaned the glass with her shirttail and showed Jack. "Notice anything odd about this picture?"

He tilted it nearer. "No, not really."

I didn't either.

"Their pictures were taken years apart" she said. "Notice how the background's a little lighter behind him? They got divorced in 1865 and never spoke to each other again; the photographer's date on here is 1871."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "Pioneers of divorce. What was their, uh, problem?"

Clair shrugged. "Who knows. I guess he was supposed to have been something of a . . . philanderer, maybe."

I glanced away, avoiding Jack's eyes. He grunted and began tamping his pipe.

"Anyway, their children didn't have a picture of the two of them together. They got a photographer to work his magic on this one." She set it on the slats of an old sled and I helped them get the next few pieces onto the truck without too much aggravation to my back.

Afterwards, Clair invited us in for a beer, but Jack said we had to get going. Still, we stood talking in the driveway for another twenty minutes, and I noticed Jack seemed especially youthful in Clair's presence, bouncing an old golf ball he'd found in the garage, springing onto the bed of the truck to tighten the ropes one last time.

We started back for town, and I thought about the picture of Clair's ancestors, how quaint the word *philanderer* had sounded when she used it. More innocuous-sounding, probably, than what the reality had been. We drove past lake-side corn fields, and then along the narrow winding road beside the bay, and Jack was quiet, except to mumble once, almost to himself, "We just get stupid sometimes, I don't know."

I didn't know either. Despite the occasional tedium, I felt

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fortunate and generally content with Nell and Ethan, and yet I'd been all set to pursue a life with Margaret that for all I knew could lead to still more tedium—and maybe worse—somewhere down the line. Of course, I doubted that, but who could say? Margaret and her ex-husband had once doubted it, too.

We were back at the narrow Heineberg Bridge now, and looking at Jack gazing down on the wide stretch of river below, I felt a little sorry that he'd be losing Clair Coleman. There was no oncoming traffic this time, and I wasn't nervous about the bridge. I glanced out the open window at the water, and in a flicker saw something jump—a small dark shape, a splash, the sudden growth of concentric circles. I thought of Champ, but it wasn't anything so rare, more than likely a bass feeding, lunging out of his element, there and gone.

"Watch the road," Jack said.

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CHARLES TOMLINSON

For a Granddaughter

1. On the Terrace

Blest the infant Babe . . .

Four of the generations are taking tea,
Except that one of them is taking milk:
It is an English, autumnal afternoon,
The texture of the air half serge, half silk.

It is an English, autumnal afternoon,
And all four of the seasons are sitting here,
Except that one of them lies interfused
With the flesh that feeds, the arm that cradles her.

The seasons are talking in a fugue of voices,
Except that she is trying out the sounds
Through which her tongue must learn to reach the words
To speak with the world which summons and surrounds

Her kindling senses: the circumference
Of many circles draws her from her warm
Dark continuity with all things close,
To know more than the flesh, the food, the arm—

That circle within the talking circle here,
By the old house, its stone-flagged passageway,
Within the circle of the lawn, the flowers, the trees,
The young attention widening where they sway.

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2. To Be Read Later On

Poets, my dear, are much the same as you:
Watching whatever shapes come into view,
They try a murmur, a melodious sound
To suit the sense of what it is they've found
And go on finding, as they write and pause,
Their aim as much the wonder as the cause.
I watched today what would have pleased you, too—
The shadows on the curtains where they blew
In at the window, shadows that showed how
(The frame quite rigid, yet the lines one flow)
Wrought metal can turn molten in the sun
Leaping along the muslins as they run,
A whirl of lattices, a flying net,
The whole breath of the day caught up in it.
Mallarmé (a poet you must read)
Wrote of une dentelle abolie—indeed
The sun writes on a curtain and erases
(In going out) those lines that are its phrases.
Whether the conflict is a birth aborted,
A Work unconsummated he had courted
(You'll spot the allusion when you read his verse
Or hear how Boulez makes the terse more terse),
For us that flowing through the window space
Could only fill more full the blowing lace,
As if our futures—yes, both mine and yours—
Were breathed towards us off the Severn's shores,
And when you lift this poem to your ear
One day, it is that breath of ocean you will hear.

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3. After Hugo

Jeanne songeait . . .

She was dreaming, sitting on the grass:
Her cheek was pink, her gaze was grave:
"Is there anything you would like to have?"
(I try to anticipate her least desire
To find what it is that sets her thoughts on fire.)
"Some animals," she said—just that, no more:
I showed her an ant in the grass—"There you are!"
But her imagination was left half-fed:
"No. Real animals are big," she said.
Children dream of the vast, the ocean draws,
Cradles and calms them on the shore
With its rough music; its shadowiness
Will wholly captivate a child's mind,
And so will the terrifying flight of the sea-wind.
They love to be terrified, need wonder, feel no distress.
"I have no handy elephant," I replied,
"So would you like something else—just say what."
Pointing a small finger at the sky, she answered "That!"
Evening would be overtaking the world soon—
I saw climbing up above the horizon an immense moon.

4. Pavanne For a Live Infanta

How would you like to wear
a yellow dress
such as this
in Velázquez's picture?
Your brocade
will make you feel at first
a little staid
perhaps, and so
you must learn
to dance the pavanne, a slow

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dance in which
your skirts will sail
over the sea-floor
of this giant palace
as noiselessly
as a painted ship.
The painter pauses:
he knows that he
can render only
your presence here
but not your movement.
Your favourite dog
has the air
of sitting for his portrait,
but has fallen asleep,
which only goes to show
how peaceful and how slow
a pavanne can be,
and how skillfully
you dance it, gliding
past his nose
unespied. Your meninas
—your waiting maids—
cluster round
to slow more and more
your pace: they
and your dwarves
Maribarbola and Nicolás
think that your gait must grow
ever more sedate,
so that the artist can
at last proceed
to contemplate
you of the pavanne
in utter stillness.

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To My Daughter

"Families," I said, conscious that I could not find
  The adequate epithet, "are nice."
"Nice families," you replied, adding
  To the faded adjective a tiny spice,
"Are nice." What I had meant was this:
  How far we (a wandering family) have come
Since that day I backpacked you down
  Into an Arizona canyon with its river
Idling below us, broad and slow;
  Next, it was the steady Susquehanna;
Now swifter currents of the Severn show
  That time is never at a stand, although the daughter
You are leading by the hand, to me
  Seems that same child cradled in Arizona.
No—you are right—: *nice* will never do:
  But it is only families can review
Time in this way—the ties of blood
  Rooting us in place, not like the unmoving trees,
And yet, as subject to earth, water, time
  As they, our stay and story linked in rhyme.

Transaction at Mallards Pike

The trunks of the spruce at Mallards Pike
  Float their reflections out across the lake
Into its depths. This columned church,
  This underwater shrine, sways in the wind;
Its dark recession might well be a mine

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Like those on either shore, but here
It is the light transforms itself to ore
Not to be sold: the sliding darks
Yield up no miner's harvest of black gold
To be weighed and traded afterwards.
Even the swimmer through that foundered nave
Is robbed of the wealth of it we have
In our dealings with a sun and surface that
Offers itself as mirror to the trees,
Then jostles their rigid tallnesses to a play
Caught only here between the wood and light—
Walkers on water dark alone can drown,
Weightlessly undulated between dawn and sundown.

Forest of Dean

Autumn

Neither pink nor brown,
You cannot take it down in ink
The colour of fallen leaves—a brush
Might match it, or music even
In an upward scale of infinite intervals
With a change of key where a hill
Meets heaven and all the degrees
Of autumn on ground, slope, trees
Clash suddenly with—no adjective
Can define the blue that brightens
Through the whole sky and, in the chemistry of sight,
Changes this glow that crackles at our feet
By being its antithesis: far, cold,
Never to be trodden, that is where
Comparison ceases and we breathe the atmosphere.

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On the Late Plane

The city is spreading its nets to catch the eye
  Of flight after flight crossing this night sky—
Nets of illumination that distance turns filigree,
  The fine-spun logic of an arterial geometry
Webbing outwards and on from each settled spot
  To reach to wherever the light still is not—
To pockets of dark where mountain sheernesses
  Ink-out the gossamer glow with their million fir trees.
Here is a star-map brought to the ground, a beauty
  Bestowed on the innumerable roadsides that by day
Harbour no hint of this transfiguration where
  They draw down the gaze of the night-sky traveller.

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ARTHUR GREGOR

Mozart in Chatillon

From Salzburg, the quartets named
for Haydn. As always in Mozart,
the second movements touch us the most.
It is early autumn, the green still bright
in the already thinning light.
Here and there, there is a brilliant red,
soon the winds will whirl up, will wipe away
the yellow leaves along the edges of
the road that mark the sidewalk.
The cat across has placed herself
upon a pole, captivated by the sight
of butterflies; like us, she is
bewitched by what she cannot catch.
What do they reach in us, those slow,
those somber chords? Recognitions,
regrets, finalities that in the end
we must accept? Memories, of course.
Of myself, a boy of twelve, at a concert of
the school orchestra where I sat last
among the second violins; and that,
spotting my mother in a front row,
affected by her distant beauty,
I had sensed, however vaguely, even then
her sadness, the irreversibility
of choice, the stubbornness of fate,
and could not, much as I might
have wished to, alter any of it.
Others, more glorious, but also sad,
as if, even when they occurred
they contained the pain of
the irretrievability that we

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would surely one day feel. Images,
of travel, of Mediterranean skies,
of domes sparkling, of canals glittering,
gondolas crossing, of beaches, cliffs,
of gardens laid out to please,
of amorous moments under trees,
of pleasures still prospering.
How much we have loved
so much of what has left us!
And now the season that is over,
what of the calls, the visits, drives,
the stops at cafés, the views of churches,
the intimate talks, the dinners outdoors,
what, if any of each, will we recover?
Is the most that we can have of love
the knowledge that it passes?
Odd then, that at least as long as
the music lasts, we should not feel
deprived, but taking us back as well
to moments of sorrows lifted,
to solace (the genius's assurance of
a steadiness, of a love that does
not fade?), we are moved, wistful
but moved, by Mozart replenished.

Memory Fragments

Across the lavender fields
vast and sloping downward steeply,
below them a ring of newly built pale houses
and then the beach, the sea;
across the bluish fields swaying lightly like a lulling sea
the sky's color similar to the fields' though a bit deeper
more like the color of the sea as I imagined it would be
(I could glimpse it far below from where I stood),

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the medieval town in back
the ramparts and the town's interior by law unchanged;
across the lavender fields
ascended from the town's central fountain
ascended from the stone rim of the basin filled and
glistening,
from there ascended
to fly across the fields
the lavender fields toward the sea
and flying deep and deeper into the deeply bluish sky,
the white doves
that will no doubt return
to sit again on the filled basin's rim—
birds not of transit
but of the disappearance into permanence.

(St. Paul de Vence)

Once again driving above them
slowing down for the view
the fields spreading below us
made ready but not yet harvested,
the carefully tended earth giving off
a haze as though a contained vastness
as well as the visible distances
that ring the fields on all sides
where earth meets sky at its descent
had settled down upon and across
the crops of wheat, of corn, of sunflowers to come,
bestowing on all the peacefulness
that may break out into our dreams,
hidden designs we recognize
as we move slowly past and as
closer to us we spot a dog
stretched out across a doorstep.

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It is the deep moment I am after,
that quick occurrence that escapes notice
like the instant when a wave in a tossed sea
falls from a peaked height back down into
the sea's vast turbulence, back into its watery
essence, its calm. As, for example, the time when
waiting at the port as a dear friend
steps off the gangplank, or when later
we speed across the bay to the rooms rented in a villa,
or when later still, the morning after and
the morning after, we come down for breakfast
set for us in the overgrown, now neglected garden
of a former summer residence. When that and
so many other incidents clearly of significance
or they would have escaped
that moment I seek now to recapture,
when the event dissolves into the secret it carries,
the promise of its permanence—
like the barge in the canal
that appears to have disappeared
when a thick fog has settled over the water.

(Dubrovnik)

The sky
a damaged blue like sheetmetal brutally treated,
the river
risen to almost the danger limit,
the surface mercilessly beaten,
only the sanctuary near its bank
rising straight into the sky's lowered height
remains solemn, steady, indifferent,
the bells tolling as always just when they're meant to,
the needy struggling at the regular hour
toward the awesome portal,
the nail-studded door so tiny by comparison.

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It's not the winds but the dissolving voluptuous shapes
gathering above and hovering on steady wings
that continue to howl and hiss their hallelujahs,
the storm-torn fragments of their changeless songs.

(St. Benoit)

It is precisely for this reason
when then as now the clouds hung low for days
and thoughts of how it was with me
had troubled me as were the men out at sea
threatened by a storm whose force they could not predict,
or here in the fields the farmers testing the winds;
it is precisely because of intrusions such as these,
inevitable perhaps but unsettling just the same,
that I must allow the sun-drenched islands to come up
that I had looked down on when at last
the little plane was signalled to take off
and we flew so low across the Aegean
I could make out the white chapels and windmills on top,
could imagine women gathering at walls
and the men driving their overladen donkeys up the hills.
It is precisely because of dreary days
and because of what, unbeknownst to me,
had happened to me in childhood
which now, this late, I have had to face,
that I must allow myself to dwell upon
light-drenched scenes I lived and those I dreamed,
of a woman I never knew
telling someone that she remembered me fondly,
of a white-clad figure I did know stepping forth,
arising there as from a distance that is not space,
assuring me thus of memory's great worth,
wondrous moments oddly illuminated as though
shot through with the gleam of permanence.

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Invisibly it strides
from a small Romanesque church,
the flowers in pots and small neat flower beds
in windows and along the simple houses opposite,

strides from the *mairie*, rational, symmetrical,
a door and two windows on the ground floor, three above,
to the chapel next to it (this is in another village),
a row of trees, three on each side, like an allée in miniature
leading to it,
the trees trimmed in accordance with the height of the little
church
and the character of the setting in which it has centrality;

strides from there to the small bridge across a stream
so narrow, so overhung with bushes and low trees
the water is barely visible
and were it not for the shimmering it imparts
around the green edges, the undefined banks
between which it runs, and the play of light on water
it offers the observant outsider passing by
(the natives, who are part of it, need not notice it),
one might not know it was there;

strides invisibly from earth to building, to man, linking
them,
the spirit within the imagination for so long a time
it creates the long remembrance that clears the mind,
shines in the mind and makes glad, simply gladdens, the
heart,—

and elsewhere, on an arranged occasion,
trumpets as to announce the unity
and voices lifted to praise it.

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Crossing the square
in a medieval town high atop a hill,
two boys, eight years or so,
arms around each other, held tightly,
paying no attention to what
they have lived with all their young lives,
and tourists facing the scenery
from a promenade below the ramparts
have come from far to see,
the vastness that extends all around
their town, the impervious dignity
of space blending so naturally
the clouds with the sparkling edges of
the valley where the river dissolves into
the sky: how could these boys sense
that a love greater than the expanse
that surrounds them from all sides,
now holds them,
already working its wonders through them.

(Sancerre)

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LOUIS SIMPSON

Waterloo, the Story of an Obsession

I wrote away to England for *Vanity Fair*, enclosing a postal money order. There wasn't a copy at school: the library didn't have one, and it wasn't on the shelves with mildewed books that had been set for examinations. There were copies of *Kenilworth* and *Virginibus Puerisque*, but no *Vanity Fair*.

In the holidays I had seen a movie with George Arliss as the Duke of Wellington, and there were glimpses of the battle of Waterloo, far too brief for my liking. The Duke stood in the stirrups, waved his hat and shouted, "Up, Guards, and at 'em!", whereupon the English soldiers charged and the French ran away. I wanted more of it, and when I came across a reference to Thackeray, saying that in *Vanity Fair* he wrote about the Waterloo campaign, I sent for the book.

It took weeks for my letter to travel by boat to London, and the book to make the voyage back, but it came at last and was delivered to me during evening Prep when we got our mail. I unwrapped the package with an excitement I wish I could recapture. In the days that followed I would take *Vanity Fair* out to the willows and, lying on my elbows, read carefully, aware that this was a classic. I was an avid reader, but for fun—this was the first book I read in the consciousness of the act.

I came to the Duchess of Richmond's ball. I came to the battle of Waterloo and . . . it wasn't there! I felt a disappointment that, happily, I cannot recapture.

Perhaps the author was meaning to put it in later . . . sometimes they did that . . . in a later chapter one of the characters would look back and remember. But the hope was immediately extinguished. The author had warned, as my heart sank, that he did not "rank among the military novelists." Worse . . . when the decks were cleared for action he would go below "and wait meekly." Now he was saying that for Englishmen and Frenchmen in years to come to continue murdering

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each other would be carrying out a "Devil's code of honour." There would be no battles in *Vanity Fair*—he disapproved of battles—apparently his middle name, Makepeace, stood for something. I found the point of view incomprehensible. None of the boys at school would have agreed with it, nor the masters who urged us on the football field to play up for the name of the house. How could anyone not enjoy French cavalry charges and British squares wreathed in smoke?

I read on—I had paid for the book out of my pocket money—and as I read I forgot the purpose I had set out with and discovered literature. When I finished *Vanity Fair* I wanted more by the same author—I had fallen under the enchantment of his voice.

It would have to wait till the holidays when I was in Kingston. I would be able to borrow his books at the public library, or perhaps find one on King Street. There was a store that sold cheap editions. Cheap? They were beautiful to me with their red or blue or green jackets and drawings on the inside.

But I didn't have to go to the Kingston library or spend my pocket money. I had a friend named Dennis Anderson. He was my friend during the holidays—there were friends you had at school and friends you saw in the holidays. We went to the same school, in the mountains a hundred miles to the west of Kingston, but I was two years older so that during the term we hardly set eyes on each other. Once at the beginning of term, when we had just got back to school, I was walking on the barbecue with another boy in Form 4A when we encountered Dennis. He spoke to me as though we were still back home. The boy who was with me laughed incredulously—it was unheard-of for a boy in 3A to speak to a 4A boy in this manner. I didn't answer, and Dennis looked abashed as we walked by. But when the holidays started we went swimming together and played Ping-Pong on his veranda. His house was practically next door—there was only an empty lot between.

Beside these holiday activities we had something else in common: we each had a stepmother. I was fond of mine but never quite at ease—I was afraid of doing something that might offend her. I think that Dennis felt the same. Once when we were playing Ping-Pong his stepmother spoke to him about

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something he had done wrong or failed to do. When she went away I saw two tears running down his cheeks.

Our fathers had divorced and remarried . . . they had new wives and had moved to new houses. This was at Bournemouth, to the east of Kingston, an area that was being developed. It was outside the town proper, and I think that my father moved there because he was an outsider. It was not unusual for a married man in Jamaica to have a mistress, but divorce was something else—it was not as respectable in the thirties as it is today.

When he was married to my mother he had a busy social life—they did a lot of entertaining at home. But very few people came to the house at Bournemouth . . . ones he had business with. The "lawn tennis" parties he and my mother gave at "Volyn"—named after the province in Russia she came from—were a thing of the past. By letting his private life be made public he had fallen into disgrace . . . at least for a while. But I can imagine what he would have said if anyone had suggested this. He was a lawyer with a reputation for speaking harshly.

One afternoon I was playing Ping-Pong with Dennis on his veranda and he was beating me by a point or two as he always did. In swimming too his hand would touch the wall a second before mine. His stepmother Arlene was sitting on the glider doing her toenails. She was an American and dressed like one, wearing shorts around the house. She asked if we'd like some lemonade. I said "No thanks" the first time she asked, as we were taught to do, and "Yes thanks" when she asked again. She went inside to make it.

In a few minutes she called to us. On my way through the drawing room I went over to look at the books. There was a row in green leather with gold lettering. They were all by Thackeray. I couldn't believe my eyes. I had seen them before but not noticed the name. Then it had meant nothing to me.

Arlene saw me gazing. I asked if I could look at one. She said yes, and I took down one of the volumes. The leather was smooth, the paper thick, and the type clear. There were pictures, but not the simple line drawings of the novels with red, blue or green jackets. Those showed people doing something . . . a woman sitting on a chair and a man leaning over to

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speak to her. A cuirassier on his horse slashing with his saber at a Scotsman in kilts who was reaching up with his bayonet to impale the cuirassier. These pictures were of streets and drawing rooms, marvelously detailed. Of a cathedral. A meadow with cows. There was a sheet of tissue paper over each picture that you lifted to see what lay beneath.

"Would you like to borrow it?" she said.

*

No one reads Thackeray today—his ideas have not worn well. They were those of an English clubman, far more intelligent than most, but one who has spent his life in one of the professions, and seen much of the world, and has come to the conclusion that all is vanity. After which he orders dinner and smokes a cigar. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher . . . all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" Perhaps so, but it is not a thought to sustain you when you have to labor, not for vanity and profit but in order to live.

The world that used to argue over which was the greater writer, Dickens or Thackeray, has opted for Dickens, especially at Christmas. But Thackeray seems to be telling the truth, while Dickens exaggerates. Dickens' humor is laid on with a shovel and his plots are melodramatic. He does beat Thackeray hands down for sheer entertainment. There's Mr. Micawber and Scrooge, and Magwitch jumping up behind a tombstone to give you a scare. There's Oliver asking for more, and Bill Sikes clubbing Nancy to death and being chased over the rooftops and falling to his death, swinging from a rope. You can't miss the moral in Dickens, while Thackeray may not seem to have one. But Thackeray could tell a story you could believe, and there was something else he could do: evoke the tears of things. Not our tears—you can leave that to Dickens—but the tears of things because we are leaving them behind and only we can speak for them.

But no one reads Thackeray, not even in the university. I said as much to Gordon Ray. I was visiting from California and would be in New York for a few days, and he wanted us to have lunch to discuss some business having to do with Guggenheim fellowships. He was in charge of the program. He was also the

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biographer of Thackeray, and as soon as I could I brought the conversation around to *Vanity Fair* and an idea I had. I would try it out on Gordon . . . it would be like hearing from Thackeray himself.

I said, "Becky Sharp was Jewish."

Gordon stared and I hastened to explain. *Vanity Fair* was published in 1848. Three years later Thackeray published "Rebecca and Rowena," a burlesque as he called it, of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. "Rebecca and Rowena" tells what happened to Ivanhoe and Rowena after their marriage. The flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, Anglo-Saxon heroine, Rowena, has turned into a pious shrew. Ivanhoe is miserable and yearns for the tender, compassionate Jewess, Rebecca.

Rowena in "Rebecca and Rowena" corresponds to Amelia in *Vanity Fair*. They are both the vapid, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth heroine of standard Victorian fiction. By the end of *Vanity Fair*, Dobbin, whose love she has exploited throughout, is already quite disillusioned with Amelia—Who, the showman asks, having his desire is satisfied? In a few years Amelia will have turned into Rowena of "Rebecca and Rowena." And Becky Sharp, whose life runs parallel to Amelia's, and crosses it and diverges, corresponds to Rebecca of "Rebecca and Rowena." As Rebecca is Jewish, so must Becky be.

Of course their characters are entirely different. Becky is "sharp," pushy, on the make, and beyond the pale, as Jews are said to be at the club. All the more seductive because she is beyond the pale. Devilish fun, doncher know, but you wouldn't want to tie up with one, not on your life.

A few hundred years ago the English believed that Jews poisoned wells and cut up Christian children in Satanic rituals. By the end of *Vanity Fair*, Becky has become positively witch-like. She has Jos Sedley in thrall. When Dobbin urges him to break off the connection and come away, Jos beseeches him not to say anything about their conversation to Becky: "she'd kill me if she knew it. You don't know what a terrible woman she is." And when Jos dies shortly after, there is a strong suggestion that she has indeed killed him in order to get at the money from the insurance policy he made out in her name. I think that Thackeray is appalled by the life in his puppet, the creation of

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his own forbidden desires, and is making her repellent so that he can break off his own unfortunate attachment.

What did Gordon make of my idea? I don't know . . . he didn't say, and we went back to discussing Guggenheim business. Scholars have ways of knowing if a man is "sound," whether or not he is a bona fide scholar, and I don't think Gordon thought I was.

Many years later I wrote a letter to the *Times* (London) *Literary Supplement*. They had published an article that said that Thackeray did not write about Jews. I wrote in to say that Becky Sharp was Jewish, pointing out that she anticipated Rebecca in his burlesque of *Ivanhoe*. The editor replied, thanking me for my letter and regretting that they could not publish it.

Kingston had been transformed. The walls were peeling and the roofs were patched with sheets of tin. Houses and gardens had been swallowed up by the town, and people stood on the corners and stared at you as you drove by. Those who could afford to do so had retreated into the hills where they lived behind barred doors and windows.

One evening Miriam and I had dinner with Dennis Anderson and his wife Maura. They lived in one of the safer neighborhoods, but when we drove through the gate two Dobermans rose to their feet, rattling their chains. A watchman told them to be quiet, it was OK, and we proceeded to the house.

Dennis was at the door to greet us. It took me a while to make out, in the face of the confident, socially adept man, the features of the sensitive boy I had known. He had taken over his father's export business and expanded it. Maura was an artist . . . the paintings in the drawing room were hers.

He talked about boys we had been to school with and what had become of them. The school bully, Weller, was dead. The big, brawling fellow, Henriquez, who used to box with my brother, had gone brawling once too often and had his nose bitten off. Jim Dolan was a contractor . . . he built a big stadium but got in over his head financially and had to leave the island. He was living in Miami. Others had done well. Phillips had emigrated to Canada and made a name for himself in the social sciences. He wrote books. He had tried reading one, Dennis said, but he couldn't . . . it was too technical.

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Had I been to see the house at Bournemouth where I used to live? Yes, I said, and had been surprised . . . it was bigger than I remembered, which was not what people said about going back. Squatters had taken it over. What I found most surprising was that a factory had been built in the empty lot between our houses, and had gone through a cycle of life . . . people had worked there, and now it was abandoned and falling apart, with cracks in the walls. It was as though I had closed my eyes for a moment and opened them again, and a lifetime had gone by.

It wasn't a factory, he said, but a garage. Anyway our houses, his father's and mine, were going to be torn down. There were plans to drive a highway along the shore, connecting with the road to the airport.

He mentioned people I must know. Did I know So-and-So? No, I said, I didn't. Well, I must know Such-and-Such? I didn't know him either.

He showed me a room with shelves filled with trophies. He had won them by his swimming, and he had taken a swimming team on a world tour. So racing against each other in the pool at Bournemouth had paid off.

His father, Kenneth, had been murdered. One day a man walked into the store on Harbour Street and shot him dead. Kenneth kept a revolver close by but this time he was taken by surprise. He had a mistress and it was said that her husband paid to have it done, but nothing was ever proved. Did I remember his stepmother Arlene? Of course, how could I forget her? I remembered her legs as she sat painting her toenails, and how she let me borrow *The Newcomes*. And *Henry Esmond*, but I bogged down in *Pendennis*. She went back to the States after Kenneth was murdered, and married an architect. She was living in Denver . . . he had a card from her at Christmas.

*

Like Thackeray I'm at a bit of a loss to know what it adds up to, fact and fiction, things that have happened and things I've read about or seen in movies. Becky Sharp and Amelia and some women I've known . . . a character in Dickens and brawling Henriquez who had his nose bitten off . . . When time has gone by they leave the same impression.

So what is fact and what is fiction? Some people worry a great

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deal about this. I've known some who threw up their hands in despair and said that nothing was real, only what was in their heads and what they said or wrote. They thought this was real.

Why do you have to choose? Why not just think that everything is real? I've no doubt about the battle of Waterloo—it happened, thousands were there, and for many years afterward people were talking about it, and some would show you their wounds. Hundreds of books have been written . . . I can recommend *Napoleon and Waterloo*, by Major A. F. Becke, R.F.A. (Retired), Hon. M.A. (Oxon.). I wouldn't recommend the French, after all they lost the battle. The biggest whopper is by Victor Hugo: he has a "hollow road" into which their cavalry plunged—that was why they lost. And Stendhal has a description that's a movie by Robbe-Grllet—there are no people, just a landscape and a few figures moving in the distance.

The battle of Waterloo is taking place on June 18, 1815, ten miles southeast of Brussels. It began at 11:30 and is now in the second phase, the attempt to break the British squares with cavalry. Sheer madness!

It begins with a distant rumbling. A line appears on the crest. It thickens and becomes a moving mass. There are lines of horsemen, flashes of helmets and breastplates. The guns in front of the squares fire and the gunners come running back. The ranks open to receive them and close again.

The horsemen are thirty yards away when the order comes to fire. When the smoke clears they are riding between the squares. One will pull his horse's head around and gallop towards a square, but the horse stops . . . it won't do it. The rider brandishes his saber and yells, and is shot out of the saddle. The ground is littered with men in cuirasses lying on their backs like turtles. Others are scuttling away.

There are hurrahs. But they stop . . . To the front, on the crest of the slope, guns are arriving and being unlimbered. There's the double sound of a gun and the ball buries itself in the mud. Other guns join in . . . the air is full of whistlings and the thud of iron hitting flesh. Something flies by . . . an arm or a leg?

No, just a shadow. I'm lying on my elbows beneath the willows, reading Erckmann-Chatrian. The sound isn't cannon but the *plock* of a bat. The cheers are for our side—they must be piling on runs.

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Bye-Bye, Bunny

Although I never met Edmund Wilson, he was the literary equivalent of my Father Flanagan, a role he performed, I long ago discovered, for a number of other literary young men who felt orphaned from literature by the study of it in universities. Such at any rate was my experience at the University of Chicago in the middle fifties, where literature was put through the grinder of Aristotle, which did not seem to me to grind exceedingly fine, and where in a bookshop on 57th Street I one day found an Anchor paperback by Edmund Wilson carrying the title, I believe, of *The All-Star Literary Vaudeville*. This was an anthology of Wilson's pieces taken from his literary chronicles published up to that time. I read it and was, instanter, swept away. This, I felt, was how a literary man ought to write: with solid style, a commanding tone, a virile professionalism. (That Wilson was F. Scott Fitzgerald's friend at Princeton, earlier his literary conscience and later his literary executor, added to his allure.) Metropolitan and worldly, there was nothing academic about Wilson, nothing pedantic or precious.

Nothing, truth to tell, very chummy, either. Quite the reverse of the writer Salinger mentions in *The Catcher in the Rye* whom one wants to call up on the telephone after reading him, Edmund Wilson, on the page, gave off a shudder of formality. A cold number, Wilson, nothing light or breezy about him, or so his writing led one to believe. "If I now play at being old," he wrote in *The Sixties*,[1] the last of the six volumes of his published journals, "I never played at being young." Wilson is one of those writers who seemed to come into the world fully formed—he was very smart very young, which is an immense advantage—but who, owing to this, show little in the way of development.

[1] THE SIXTIES, by *Edmund Wilson*. Ed. with an Introduction by *Lewis M. Dabney*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $35.00.

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Physically, Edmund Wilson was no great beauty. In his young manhood he looked rather like a disagreeable Herbert Hoover pictured in a squattening fun-house mirror; in middle-age, like a redneck Southern sheriff; and ended like a pretty fair stand-in for Sydney Greenstreet. He looked, certainly, not at all like the nickname Bunny, given to him in childhood and for which he never cared. Karl Shapiro used to refer to Wilson as "the Bunny," adding a definite article that comically points up the utter inappropriateness of this cuddly nickname for this most formidable and uncuddly of men.

Long before his death in 1972 at the age of seventy-seven, Edmund Wilson was everywhere referred to as America's last great man of letters. Reviewers would cite his having written criticism, history, journalism, fiction, poetry, plays, and much else; they would blather on about his being in the tradition of Sainte-Beuve, Taine, and Saintsbury. All true enough, if a trifle stale. (Wilson himself complained about a man named Chanler Chapman always comparing him to Dr. Johnson.) Honorific though it may be, the label of man of letters is also one that brings with it a strong aroma of the old-fashioned, even the distinctly out of it. Wilson may have been old-fashioned, but, as his journals show, he struggled manfully right up to the end not to be out of it.

As a writer, Wilson was known less for any discrete work than for an impressive body of work. He produced more than thirty books. A man with sufficient reputation and force of character to dictate to his publisher the size and shape of his books, Wilson was able to have almost all his books made on the model of the *Pléiade* editions, short and stout, rather like himself. People differ about which are the best of Wilson's books, agreeing only that his fiction was stillborn. Of all Wilson's books, the ones I most admire are his chronicles of criticism, *Shores of Light*, *Classics and Commercials*, *The Bit Between My Teeth*, and those others in which he gathered together his magazine pieces, and *Patriotic Gore*, his really quite majestic book on the literature of the American Civil War. But there were few books—even essays—of his from which I, for one, didn't feel I had learned something I did not know before. As a critic, Wilson was the great maitre d' of literature in the twentieth

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century, always showing one to a good table on which rich literary provender was piled.

Wilson had his famous blind spots: he was a Hispanophobe, he had no taste for German literature, he failed to grasp the profundity in Conrad, and the excitement about Kafka was a mystery to him. Still, he wrote well about a vast number of wide-ranging subjects, and ended with a large and cohering body of work, a genuine *oeuvre*, one of the few American writers about whom this could be said. One of the rare entries in *The Sixties* that expresses contentment comes in Wilson's seventies, when he writes: "I might as well settle down to the kind of satisfaction I can have: little worry about money, comfort in sitting around reading and playing the phonograph, having books and letters sent to me, enjoying a reputation and no great pressure to produce." Yet this turns out to be cold comfort, for in the very next entry we find our last great American man of letters, trousers round his ankles, on the can, where "I read the folders of old reviews of my books, in order to support my morale—though this only makes me realize again how slipshod most reviewing is." Nothing quite takes the joy out of life like having standards.

As a young man, Wilson was told by Christian Gauss, his teacher at Princeton, that he ought to write a *confession d'un enfant du siècle*. Wilson responded by saying that "that kind of thing is really repugnant to me, and I expect to become more and more objective instead of more and more personal." Aspiring to the objective is certainly how Wilson began his career. Authority, that indispensable and yet unteachable quality of the critic, seemed to come easily to Wilson, who put the case plainly enough: "The implied position of the people who know about literature (as is also the case in every other art) is simply that they know what they know, and that they are determined to impose their opinions by main force of eloquence or assertion on the people who do not know." Case closed.

"The shy little scholar of Holden Court," as Fitzgerald described Wilson at Princeton, soon became the critical equivalent of a traffic cop, as Maxwell Bodenheim once called him, directing the flow of literary reputations in the 1920s from his perch as literary editor of *The New Republic*. In his autobiogra-

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phy, T. S. Matthews has described how Wilson aimed him, Matthews, then his underling on the magazine, by instructing him about whose reputations deserved inflation and whose deflation through reviews Wilson assigned him. Less interested in making friends than in influencing people, Wilson early acquired a full share of enemies. Hart Crane disliked Wilson's propensity to "hatch little squibs of advice to poets not to be so professional." One of those poets, E. E. Cummings, whom Wilson lectured to in print and in a letter cited as "that young man [who] is very half-baked and needs correction rather than encouragement," struck back by calling Wilson "the man in the iron necktie."

"The man in the iron necktie" once seemed a bang-on perfect description of Edmund Wilson, but no longer. The publication of Wilson's journals has changed that. Changed it for better or worse is unclear, but that it is changed is beyond dispute. The same young Wilson who despised the personal has been laid out for the public gaze in a way that one might think he would have hated, except that it has been done through his own choosing. Wilson not only chose to publish his journals, which he had begun to do in his lifetime, but left instructions to continue their publication after his death.

Upstate, the first of the Wilson journal volumes to be published, gave only an inkling of what was to follow. That book showed Wilson camping out during steaming summers in the large stone house in Talcottville, New York, that was left him by his mother. Chiefly a chronicle of complaint, it puts on display an Edmund Wilson rolling round the old stone house, both structure and occupant in considerable disrepair. From this volume, one learned about Wilson's loneliness, his many illnesses, something of his serious drinking, his strong feeling of being thoroughly out of sympathy with the new and (to him) displeasing era in which he found himself. Working away on his various literary projects in the morning, sitting on the porch of the Talcottville house with a shotgun on his lap while juvenile delinquents roared past on motorcycles, drunk and with broken bridgework, such were among the tableaux Wilson left of the man of letters in old age.

From the evidence of *Upstate* one could perhaps understand the dark views set out in Wilson's introduction to *Patriotic Gore*,

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where the conduct of men and nations is likened to schools of fish, clouds of grasshoppers, voracious sea slugs, and compared unfavorably to the anthropoid gorilla. Wilson was during these years a man in trouble with the Internal Revenue Service and in wretched health, to whom the world seemed to conspire to displease him. In *Upstate*, Wilson seemed to be recapitulating the life of a less refined Henry Adams, ending his days in petulance and literary crankishness.

The publication of the subsequent volumes of journals altered the picture dramatically. We learn in *Upstate*, for example, that Wilson needs dental help. In *The Sixties*, we learn that he is also eager to bed down his dentist's wife—and is only slightly though not finally restrained from doing so by the prospect of losing the services of a good dentist. What the publication of the journals has done, certainly in this final volume, is exhibit Edmund Wilson as a sex-crazed old coot. All the Wilson journal volumes have been sex-ridden, but *The Sixties* demonstrates the sad if rather obvious truth that the last stage of sex, for those who do not know when to leave the field, is degradation. In this book Wilson becomes the least dignified of sexual clowns—the old goat.

Philip Larkin, another journal-keeper, left an order for one of his literary executors, his long-time friend and lover Monica Jones, to shred his thirty volumes of journals, which Miss Jones—luckily for Larkin, no Max Brod she—did straight-away after his death. Larkin's biographer, Andrew Motion, conjectures that, among other things, these volumes may have contained "a sexual log book full of masturbatory fantasies." If so, much better not to know about them, I say, so, Emily, please send a dozen long-stem roses and a note of appreciation to the faithful Miss Jones.

No such luck for Wilson, the sexual material in whose journals has nothing to do with fantasy but is, alas, entirely factual. In one of the earlier journal volumes Wilson makes reference to his "large pink prong"—one of the few of Wilson's phrases that refuse to depart the mind—and he never hesitates to record that member's escapades, including those with his fourth wife, Elena, who is the dominant female personage in *The Fifties* and *The Sixties*. "When I came back from my walk, Elena had opened her eyes, and we made love in the sand. . . .

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Divine—I had had (the new and better kind of white wine) just enough to drink—no anesthetising of sensation in the last moments for me, as I felt myself driving the charge home." In one of the earlier journals—*The Twenties*, I believe—Wilson, recording himself in action, notes that "I addressed myself to her bloomers." Now, in *The Sixties*, in the sack with his dentist's wife, "I invited her to do fellatio." (Let us hope this was not the best invitation the poor woman had had that week). Anti-aphrodisiacal, sounding in his no-nonsense approach to sex like no one so much as Frank Harris, Wilson's writing on sex could give an alley cat the droops on a warm Saturday night.

Perhaps this is the place to put Elena Wilson's name in posthumous nomination for an award I have long wished Alfred Nobel had left money to institute: the Nobel Prize for Marriage. Along with such figures as Sonya Tolstoy and Anna Dostoyevsky, Leonard Woolf and Lionel Trilling, Elena Wilson qualifies among those husbands and wives of writers who have taken a lot, in sickness and in health, in life and even after death, from troublesome, thoughtless, and often embarrassing mates. Putting up with the Bunny's social antics—one night in a fit he threw an ashtray at Jason Epstein, he never seemed to have any compunction about disparaging people to their faces, he was a man who always demanded his own way—not to mention his amorous Bunny hugs, could not have been what, in the U.S. Army, used to be called light duty. Elena Wilson also edited, with tact and good sense, her husband's letters after his death. Nobel Prize for Marriage material, Mrs. Wilson—no question about it.

In *The Sixties*, Wilson is still bonking away at Elena—and still recording it in his journal. Despite occasional bouts of angina—thoughts of heart attack in the midst of sex can scarcely be encouraging—he keeps at it nonetheless. One salutes him for diligence, but why, one has to ask, does he feel the need to record sex with his wife in his journal? The best conclusion I can come up with is that Edmund Wilson was the true type of the graphomaniac. Some graphomaniacs are defined by their need to be writing always. But to the true, the deep, the incurable graphomaniac nothing has really happened, nothing is quite real—not even, apparently, sex with one's wife—until one has written it out.

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Nothing was alive to Wilson, one suspects, except words, which were everything to him. In *The Forties*, he could write of Gogol's "nutritious long paragraphs that flow thickly, like jam poured into a jar, or are stirred round like dough in a bowl." Writing out his sexual congress with his wife, to use good stiff Wilson-like language, is one thing, publishing it for the world to read quite another. In an age such as ours, high marks can no longer be given for candor; and true nonconformity, nowadays, would seem to reside with reticence. Wilson is, I think, paying the price for his decision by becoming something like a sexual laughingstock. Certainly, the reviews of *The Sixties* have tended to concentrate on what one can only describe as Edmund Wilson's sexual low jinks: scoring in the Princeton Club in his seventies, mounting the old bed in his Talcottville house in BVD's and his "uncomfortably bristling double garters" with his dentist's wife.

A shame, really, for there is much in this, Wilson's final journal, that makes him immensely attractive—more attractive than he had hitherto seemed. In *The Forties*, Wilson records, apropos of his visit to Santayana in the Hospital of the Blue Nuns in Rome, that "the writer, when he ages, is in a better situation than the practitioner of some kind of work which requires more physical exertion: he only has to sit and write, and he finds that he now knows his business better and is in full command of his forces. I have been feeling something of this as I have been coming closer to fifty." Much to this, I suppose, but within fairly severe limits. One of these limits is health, and the breakdown thereof, of which *The Sixties* is sadly replete with details. In the last decade of his life Wilson suffered from heart trouble, gout (developing into rheumatoid arthritis), auditory hallucinations, dental difficulties, shingles, an enlarged liver, and deafness; add to this his impressive drinking, his worries about his children, his problems with the IRS (he had failed to pay his taxes for years)—and put them all together they do not spell golden pond.

"Growing old," wrote Anthony Powell in *Temporary Kings*, "is like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven't committed." In *The Sixties*, Wilson teeters toward and then away from this view. He writes that "I no longer have my old curiosity, sympathetic or antipathetic emotions. Since I'll soon

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be fading out of it, why bother to read books, meet people, travel to foreign countries. . . . All of my delightful adventures are now in the past. I sometimes enjoy remembering them, but even that is losing its attraction." Yet when his friend the Harvard classicist Arthur Nock dies, after lamenting the transitoriness even of true scholarship, and that all that his friend Nock had stored in his mind is now gone, Wilson takes courage, noting that "though I suffer from various ailments, I am not yet so badly off as he was and may yet accomplish something." One of the advantages of being an atheist, as Wilson was, is that one is never without hope for personal if not for ultimate salvation.

A feeling of loneliness broods over these journals. Although Wilson had a regular social round—in Manhattan, in Wellfleet, in Talcottville—he nonetheless seems oddly friendless. Perhaps this had much to do with his having among his friends no true equals. He had long ago given up the friendship of John Dos Passos, his contemporary and another man of the twenties, over political disagreement. Leon Edel, Alfred Kazin, Jason Epstein were often in his company, but none existed on a plane of intellectual equality with him. Those who did—Isaiah Berlin, André Malraux—were, like Wilson himself, essentially intellectual monologists. Equality implies the possibility of intimacy, and it may well be that that quality was long before killed off in Wilson by a formidable father with a delicate nervous organization and an unyielding mother who was hard of hearing. Like many a small boy who sought succour in books, he grew into a solitary and rather sad man.

The day-by-day grind of life for the aging Edmund Wilson was no *déjeuner sur l' herbe*. Under the rubric of "*Monotony of my life and its limitations*," writing about his life in his early seventies, he describes his standard day:

> I wake up first about 4 and read for a couple of hours. . . . Then I go to sleep again and have an unpleasant dream, from which I wake feeling rather worse than I had at four o'clock. I sit on the edge of the bed for a while and stare at my bare feet. . . . I then go to my bathroom and sit on the toilet, reading Jules Renard's journal or something, which helps me to face the rest: getting the yellow goo off my tongue with a washcloth or a towel, hawking up blood-phlegm, perfunctorily brushing my largely artificial teeth. I then sit down in the middle room, and Elena brings me breakfast, at the

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> end of which I take a digitalis. Before breakfast, I do serious reading, which I continue for a time after, but during breakfast I read papers and magazines, which are easier to skim through and handle. I don't get to work as a rule till eleven or twelve o'clock. . . . About 3, we go to town for the mail, the papers and a pint of whisky. If it is fine and I feel up to it, E. takes me for a little walk like a dog, or a short drive. In the late afternoon I get a drink and shave, playing the phonograph. . . . Then I go into the middle room and play solitaire, slowly nursing my drink. Elena gets us a modest supper, after which I read or play more solitaire or am so muggy and sleepy that I go to bed and take a Nembutal or a whisky and go right to sleep. I now try to resist the temptation to finish my unfinished drink in the early morning or to supplement it from downstairs. If I do, I lie in bed, my mind very active with attractive ideas, which, however, when I come to rather later, I know that I am in no shape to realize and can only crawl to my bathroom and mechanically get a new day under way.

So, for the poor Bunny, it went—another day, another dolor.

And yet it must be said that, greatly to his credit, Wilson hung in, trying to the end to get the most out of life. *The Sixties* reveals facets of Wilson one had not known before, some surprisingly charming. He was, for example, an ardent reader of *Dick Tracy* and other comic strips. He cared more about music than I had realized. He remains interested in magic, "a childish recreation that I have carried all through my life," and exults at finding a new magic shop on 42nd Street in Manhattan. He continues to go to the theater and the movies. He retains a strong interest in gossip, recording John F. Kennedy's sex adventures or the late president telling the too obsequious Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.—"he is naive in so many ways," Wilson notes—"go to your kennel."

Boozing is part of his regular hygiene. A man of the twenties, Wilson was, like many who came of age in that decade of Prohibition, an industrious boozer. On a not untypical night at home in Wellfleet, on Cape Cod, where he lived with his wife when not at Talcottville, along with a night of listening to phonograph records and playing solitaire, he records: "I drink a pint of scotch and sometimes half a bottle of wine. This puts me to sleep." In *Near the Magician*, his daughter Rosalind's memoir of her father, she recalls him going to bed in Talcottville with a full tumbler of whiskey, hearing him ramble round

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the house late at night, then wake in a room other than the one in which he had first gone to bed. In an entry from 1966, Wilson talks about a dinner at his younger friends Jason and Barbara Epstein's with Erich Heller in attendance at which he, Wilson, grew so tired "that I decided I'd better leave and dragged Elena away—she said at 9 and before we'd had dessert. This is rude. I am handling this badly." I recall Erich Heller recounting that same evening to me somewhat differently; in his account, Wilson was so drunk he passed out in his chair at table.

Still, through his illnesses, despite the heavy boozing, Wilson nonetheless functioned impressively well. He relied on reading as other people on breathing. He once remarked that the Marquis de Sade was the only writer he couldn't bear to read at breakfast. He claims that only "the *Koran* is unreadable" and that he can never finish a book by Henry Miller. In *The Sixties*, he lists all the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and other English plays he read in 1965–66—they were thirty-four in number, thirty-five if you add Racine's *Britannicus*—all of which he read in preparation for a "farce-melodrama" of academic life he was planning. He notes: "I find myself more and more addicted to reading Victorian and Edwardian and later English memoirs." He decides that the best thing to travel with is a volume of Balzac. He finds dull stretches in Francis Parkman's histories, yet admires them for "the avoidance of generalization, the description of events always in concrete detail. The larger tendencies are shown by a chronicle of individualized persons and actions. It is what I try to do myself." When he doesn't have an intellectual project going, he allows that he falls into a state of nervous collapse. When he isn't working hard on one or another of his projects, he feels "rather guilty about frittering my time away: . . . writing nothing but letters and drooling along in this diary."

One of the items about Wilson's career that *The Sixties* clarifies is the quality of his famous talent as a polyglot, which, it seems, has been greatly overrated. Apparently he spoke no foreign languages well. He remarks on his lack of fluency in French; reading *Faust* with his cosmopolitan wife, he allows that "the weakness of my knowledge of German undoubtedly largely prevents me from appreciating Goethe as a poet." In the years

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covered by this volume of the journals, he is taking tutoring in Hungarian, most difficult of European languages, though one gathers without much progress. All this makes it even more astonishing that Wilson would take on Vladimir Nabokov in a dispute over the latter's translation of Pushkin from what was, after all, Nabokov's native language—a dispute that caused a final falling out between the two friends.

The publication of journals, diaries, and letters of recent vintage are often hard on the living, whose names come in for mention. Lewis M. Dabney, who is at work on Wilson's authorized biography, writes in his editor's foreword to *The Sixties* that "almost without exception his [Wilson's] friends have graciously accepted being subjects of his scrutiny." Genuine graciousness is required. It cannot be pleasant to be Daniel Aaron and discover, in *The Sixties*, that Wilson thought you a man with "no imaginative grasp or intellectual penetration"; or Harry Levin, who is written off as "the perfect type of the envious literary man *manqué*"; or Paul Horgan, from whose mouth "the dropping of names was like the rattle of rain on the roof"; or V. S. Pritchett, who "laughs too much, and you have to laugh with him"; or Isaiah Berlin, who is cited for conversational overkill of a kind such that "an evening with him is quite fatiguing"; or Susan Sontag, whose "usual pretentious and esoteric way" fails to impress him; or Brendan Gill, who is memorialized in these pages for his partiality for porno, specifically "flesh flicks." No, the Bunny is even more emphatically not Salinger's writer that one wants to call on the telephone after reading him. Had he called you, perhaps you would have done better to have hung up.

The other danger inherent in publishing private thoughts of near contemporary writers is that they fail one or another of the current political correctness tests. Mencken has taken his lumps for this; more recently and quite as thumpingly, so has Philip Larkin. Wilson, in this volume, looks to be in danger in two realms—Jews and homosexuals—but turns out to be so only in one. One is ready to dial up the Anti-Defamation League when, early in *The Sixties*, Wilson, in 1963, writes that "one does get the impression that the Jews regard themselves as having a monopoly on suffering, and do not want the Negroes to muscle in." In fact, Wilson turns out to be rather philo-Semitic. Jason Epstein tells Wilson that he "overrated the Jews,

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on account of the New England identification with them; they were really awful people." (What's that ADL number again?) Early at a dinner party, after a few volleys against the Boston Irish and a woman from Scotland, he remarks that "Jews are rarely silly or sloppy." And at a party for the English historian Cecil Roth, he, Wilson, notes that "I seem to be the only goy." Whew, a near thing, but the Bunny earns a pass on the Jews.

Arranging a pass on homosexuals is not so easily effected. Wilson was of the generation that did not view homosexuality as a negligible fact in human character and his own views on the subject are harsh and without subtlety. He thinks W. H. Auden does not have "much understanding of people"; that, owing to his homosexuality, he "is likely to be put off by poets who are lyrical about women"; and that his "appetite for Tolkien" is evidence that homosexuals "don't seem to have fully matured." In London, he is at a dinner where Geoffrey Gorer kissed Auden, "and I found myself in the gelatinous medium of the London homosexual-literary world"—a world in which he does not find himself at all comfortable. After reading Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey, he notes: "To imagine those whiskered Cambridge men such as Strachey and Maynard Keynes kissing and rolling around together!" Of a book by Parker Tyler on Tchetilchew, he writes that it is "a book about a pansy written by a pansy for pansies."

Publication of such remarks nowadays would easily have deprived Edmund Wilson of the many awards that began to come his way in the last years of his life. Wilson lived just long enough to reap such rewards, though there is not much evidence that they gave him pleasure nor quietened the dubiety about his own literary quality that resides in every good writer. In 1963, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, despite his troubles with the IRS. In 1965, he was made a fellow at the Wesleyan Center for Advanced Study. The following year he won an award from the American Academy of Arts and the National Medal for Literature. In 1966, he won the $30,000 prize of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. When asked why he accepted such awards, he answered, "For the money of course." At the dinner at which he received the Aspen prize, the wife of the director of the Aspen Institute, confusing his authorship of *To the Finland Station*, asked him if

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he wrote *Finlandia*, to which he replied, grumpily, "No, that was written by a Finn." In his journal he wrote that "these awards I am getting make me rather nervous. They mean I am an O.K. character like Thornton Wilder."

But the true interior drama in this last of Edmund Wilson's journal volumes has to do with Wilson's final verdict on the meaning of life. "I find that I more and more feel a boredom with and a scorn for the human race," is, in its tone, a fairly standard entry in this book. He remains utterly distant from any religious feeling or even interest, and allows that he can't even "enter into the point of view of someone who talks about this love between God and the human race." This utter want of the spiritual element in Wilson, his deep incuriosity about the metaphysical, was at once his greatest weakness and his greatest strength: it left him baffled before those writers who sought or sorely felt the loss of religion; and it caused him to concentrate always on the concrete, the rational, the explainable.

In the last year of his life, Wilson had his beds moved into his studies in his houses at Talcottville and at Wellfleet. In the midst of his own dark views and physical ruin, he reads Macaulay and "somewhat regained my equanimity and inspiration to live." He doubts that he will live to see eighty, and aids his own prediction by refusing a pacemaker for his weakened heart. When in hospitals, he corrects the grammar of a hospital attendant who instructs him to "lay" on the table and gives other hospital workers a hard time over their ending every sentence with "O.K." He up and walks out of hospitals when he damn well pleases. Nobody, not even his physicians, orders the Bunny about.

In the end, Edmund Wilson is a man whom it may be difficult to like but whom it is impossible not to admire. He had the courage of his lack of religious convictions: no whining about death occurs in these journals, no terror about the prospect of oblivion is expressed. With lust guttering out, curiosity narrowing, even his need for intellectual domination waning, he regrets only that he has reached the point when "one cannot even imagine any more the time when one had once participated" [in life] and avers that "one ought perhaps to have died before reaching this point, when one still had the illusion of participating. One looks down on an empty arena."

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Did Wilson know that, through the long years of hard work and relentless literary production, he had become part of the chain of writers whom, forty-five years before his own death in 1972, he had cited in his essay "A Preface to Persius"? In the penultimate paragraph of that essay Wilson wrote: "In the meantime, there was nothing to do save to work with the dead for allies, and at odds with the ignorance of most of the living, that the edifice [of serious culture], so many times begun, so discouragingly reduced to ruins, might yet stand as the headquarters of humanity!" He is one of those dead allies now, an ancestor to the small, self-formed family that still cares about that edifice, and his career an inspiration. Edmund Wilson, so much of whose work entailed searching out greatness in others, in the end, even with all his flaws, was himself a great man.

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DAVID MASON

The Escape

In summer insects clouded over the pond
and all was still, except for the hound barking
at swallows that flew circles through the air.
The boy was wet from kneeling in the grass
to look inside the leaves, and played a game
with a willow switch that he had broken off,
trying to balance it in his open palm.
At the house, drawers and bedsheets hung on lines,
the old barn sweltered in its peeling paint,
velvet soil was disked, arching over the rise
to fields where his invisible father worked—
but as he played he balanced all of this
like the switch that wavered in his outstretched hand.
Even the high gibberish of geese heading south
was part of the great stillness at the pond.

*

Now the white lady with powdery stockings
and soft chest returns to the chair where he sits.
He doesn't want her blanket, he wants her breasts
unbuttoned, pushed close to his face, but she
pins his hands to the chair. "No, Mr. Berge."
They're always putting down his hands like that.
The white lady's gone, swinging her white rump.
The hound's run off with the switch in his teeth.
The man has lost count of the cars on the road
with their faint grinding noise beyond the grass.
He sees the stubble of an early harvest
next to corn rows leading to the iron sky
beyond the fence. Somewhere out of sight
are squabbling geese. It hurts to lift his head.

They told him to lift his head and look up

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at the woman in his room. No one he knew.
She was old. Whatever she cried about,
he couldn't fix it. "I can't fix it," he said.
"Where in hell has that hound run off with my switch?"
Over the rise where his father worked. "They got
a chain-link fence there now." But the marsh grass
still clutches the wet soil at the pond's edge.

When he stands he can feel his cold T-shirt,
but doesn't want the blanket on his chair.
Too much to carry and he isn't going far.
He shuffles down the lawn where the pond smell
grows inside him. Geese babble in wet clouds;
the summer's gone, faster than it ought to.
Sometimes the night comes out of the tall grass
just beyond the fence that helps him stand
so he walks along it, smelling the earth

so full in his nostrils, so still that day
he balanced the switch upon his open hand . . .
His hands on the fence are thick, patchwork creatures,
red over lifted bones.
Of course the woman who cried in his room was Agnes.
He knew it well before they said her name,
but couldn't explain the blackbird in his skull,
the way it passed its wing across his eyes
and wiped out all the years.

He stands at the fence and tries to remember Agnes
peeling an onion in the kitchen sink,
wiping the tears on her sleeve. He has seen
those walls with roses on them many times
but doesn't recollect who lived in them.
They move away as if the house were jacked up
and hauled off on the bed of an old truck.
Faces come and go in the moving rooms
but he can't remember any of their names.

*

All the sudden he's taller than the fence.

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The railroad ties for flowerbeds are piled
almost close enough. He steps down, rolls one
off the pile. Smell of creosote and pond.
Summer smell of ditch grass and cut soil.
The ties roll easy down against the fence
and he can stand above the topmost bar.
With a long *Oh God* he rolls over the top,
lands on his back in the tall grass, looking up,

and there they are—geese in a ragged V.
They squawk like an unoiled flywheel. "Give it
some oil," he says, and laughs with his hurt ribs.
The fence stares down on him from a long ways
but the lady in white can't grab him now,
and anyway, he's heading to the house,
over the furrows to the drawers and bedsheets
where the hound has run.

He starts around the pond,
but the earth is weaker than it used to be.
The mud sticks to his shoes, he falls and stands
with wet black circles on his trouser knees—
just like that day he balanced on his palm
until the old man came back from the fields
and tanned his hide for some chore he didn't do.
He feels the switch come down across his back,
the tears squeezed from the edges of his eyes.
Nobody tells him why this has to happen.
What did I do to you? he wants to know,
but his old man won't say a single word.

His arms feel wet, it has begun to rain.
There are no geese, there are no swallows here.
His father rages and his mother waits
down in the earth where he is kneeling now.
He cannot see the laundry on the line
because the wind is bending the tall grass
and bending the willow branches over him.

Now the fence is gone, there are only fields

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of black soil, corn rows leading to the sky
which lowers darkly, driving down the rain.
The cars go by more quickly on the road.

That's when he knows the hound is long, long dead,
and that the woman crying in his room
cried for him. She could help him find the barn,
but he no longer can recall her name,
and anyway the soil is numbing him
with cold. It's easier to lie down here
and wait for the whipping that will surely come.

The Summer of Love

I went to sea in the Summer of Love
in a boat with my Boy Scout troop.
That summer I was only twelve,
our boat was a rusty sloop.

The island where we spent a week
was twenty miles from home,
but in our minds we were refugees
from vaguely exotic doom.

A dozen boys who lolled about
on beaches, lied about girls,
stared at any passing yacht
chanting the latest Beatles,

we liked the underwater voice
of "Yellow Submarine,"
which was all the DJs ever chose
to play in the afternoon.

Our scoutmaster, Mr. MacIntosh,

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went quietly mad. He drank
from tidal pools and chased the fish,
his eyes seemed never to blink.

The fathers who came to take him away
in a little trawling boat
gave our troop permission to stay
three days with no adult.

With no adult, what savages
we were! Our boyish lies
grew like grotesques, the vestiges
of epic ecstasies!

But sometimes Mr. MacIntosh
came back in our fireside tales.
The world of grown-ups seemed awash
in trouble; some took pills,

some gassed themselves in their garages.
Recalling those who were mad,
we poked our sticks in the campfire's ashes
and felt unaccountably sad.

(Later I read that the Summer of Love
was the summer of the damned;
sixteen thousand American boys
had died in Viet Nam.)

We dreamed after girls on the passing yachts
and waited in the shade,
and when the adults came back in boats
to rescue us, we were glad.

On the wharf at home we bought ice cream cones,
shook the sand from our shoes.
We went on back to casual lawns,
Monday meetings, other friends,
the feeling that summer never ends
and we would never lose.

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No One Had Told Us

For years only rats and mice had lived there.
No one pruned the mulberry or pulled the grass.
No one ate the figs beside the cistern.

We swept the one-roomed hut where we would live,
stuffed the ancient mattress with a mix of herbs,
painted windows, put up screens, hung a door.

Each night we waited. When the sun went down
a cooling breeze came from the slopes of mountains,
silenced the cicadas in the olive trees.

People said our bay was once Athena's.
A spring emerged from rocks as if divined
and fed our little garden by the sea.

No one had told us, or we had not heard
the story every child is forced to know,
of why the hut was empty when we found it.

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NINA BOGIN

Inside the Chimney

Inside the chimney, the embers are glowing
like the lights of a far-off city in the dark—

I'd like to go there, down a straight road,
through frosted fields that are

patched with mist, the sky netted
with blue clouds that snag

on the moon, a sickle moon that lies on its side
as if it were asking a question, high over

the black streets lit with lamps,
there might as well be a wall

around the city or a sea
for it's an island to itself, no one

thinks of leaving or if they leave, it's only
to come back quickly, thankfully, into the dark

knot where people and streets twist into
each other with their cars and music

and words, especially their words, everything is going
fast, a tight whirl, a mazurka that spins

and spins and never comes to an end, though at
the very center there's a lull

where one hears one's own heart
beating its rhythm within the rhythm

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of the din, and there, hand in hand, a man and a woman,
you and I, leave the crowd to walk in the dim

side streets, alone, wrapped into our thoughts, our unspoken
questions shifting in the shadows of the buildings

and the answers drifting off into the cold air like the breath,
frosted, blue, that rises from our mouths, there are no

answers, only the far
end of the street, high above the city, where the moon

tilts on its side, old grandmother in her wooden
rocker, nodding her head, when

will it come to an end, when will we come to our senses, she's
seen enough in her long life and still it goes on,

the madness, the longings, the words,
especially the words that she shakes out of her apron

into the chimney-fire where coals are burning
like the lights of a far-off city in the night.

Yugoslavia in Ruins

As if we could hear dark thunder
across the snowfields, across the battle-green
hills. As if the hawk circled
with a message in its grip, scrawled
in rust. If we put on our boots,
fill our pockets with warm chestnuts, we can start
before morning. We'll follow their voices, the lost
notes ringing from the screes. We'll sing
the echoes ourselves. We'll climb through
the forest with its gongs of silence. This is all

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we'll have to give them—fistfuls
of autumn and smoke, words
broken on every crag of these forsaken outposts.

Halabja

Halabja, tonight the silence of the world
is so heavy above you

that the stars
slow their burning and gaze

at the emptiness, the terrible grass
whitening the fields.

Flocks of sheep on the hillsides, children
in their embroidered shirts,

women, men, wrapped in each other's arms
as if the whole world had lain down to sleep—

what is this day that begins with the singing
of all days, the bread, the milk, the heated pan,

the tree branch swinging
in the wind, the one bird

perched at the crown? It is the day
when history turns its back,

when the old laws
turn to ash in the grazing lands.

No gods, no men come forward. Only children
with the faces of angels, and they are dead.

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March 1992

Mud spring. Brown puddles on the path.
The torrent gorged with white water.
The schoolchildren's voices across the pasture.
Snow falls sometimes,
not sticking. Finches call
under the eaves. The red tips
of the birches stand straight up
out of the field. I move
through the calm hours of the day
with my uneasy awareness.
The clouds move through the sky
at the same rhythm. How strange it is
to hover over words, like the smoke
from the loggers' fires, over the valley.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

James on Tour

Here are some observations by an American traveler, arrived in Rome for the first time:

> If my wits had not been too much congealed, and my fingers too numb, I should like to have kept a minute journal of my feelings and impressions during the past fortnight. It would have shown modern Rome in an aspect in which it has never yet been depicted. But I have now grown somewhat acclimated, and the first freshness of my discomfort has worn off, so that I shall never be able to express how I dislike the place, and how wretched I have been in it . . . Cold, narrow lanes, between tall, ugly, mean-looking, white-washed houses, sour bread, pavements most uncomfortable to the feet, enormous prices for poor living; beggars, pickpockets, ancient temples and broken monuments, and clothes hanging to dry about them; French soldiers, monks, and priests of every degree; a shabby population, smoking bad cigars,—these would have been some of the points of my description.

The passage, from Hawthorne's Italian notebooks, does exactly what it says he can no longer do—gives expression, in vivid particulars, to acute discomfort. "One cold, bright day after another has pierced me to the heart, and cut me in twain as with a sword, keen and sharp, and poisoned at point and edge": Hawthorne's genius responds most fully to the experience of a new place when it's felt in every way to be inimical, an assault equally on the flesh and spirit. As we read on in the journals and Hawthorne thaws out a bit, appreciating some of the monuments he's been oppressed by, we almost regret losing the acidly depressed tone of those early pages. His original contribution as a travel writer lies in his rendering of how profoundly upsetting it is to find yourself in a new place.

Nothing could be further from the spirit of Henry James's travel writings, now imaginatively assembled in two volumes by

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The Library of America.[1] Unlike the New England-bound Hawthorne who first set foot in Rome in 1858 when he was fifty-three, James was to the Continental manner born. First transported there when he was six months old, he claimed that his earliest memory was of the Place Vendôme; his first adult tour of Europe, mainly France and Italy, was made in 1869 when he was in his twenties. So when, back in America the following year he found himself at Lake George and was informed by a friend that it strongly resembled Lake Como, James could deal urbanely with the matter of such comparative judgments: "Lake George is quite enough like the Lake of Como to impel you, if the image of the latter is fresh in your mind, to pursue the likeness to its inevitable phase of unlikeness." Which he then proceeds to do. Although as a traveler James must have had moments of irritation, fatigue, loneliness, even homesickness (wherever "home" for him could be said to be), as a travel writer he is the very soul of equanimity and composure. One or two exceptions only prove the rule: in the opening pages of *English Hours* he finds himself, preparatory to an extended stay in London, in lodgings that feel "stuffy and unsocial . . . an impersonal black hole in the huge general blackness":

> The uproar of Piccadilly hummed away at the end of the street, and the rattle of a heartless hansom passed close to my ears. A sudden horror of the whole place came over me, like a tiger-pounce of homesickness which had been watching its moment. London was hideous, vicious, cruel, and above all overwhelming. . . . In the course of an hour I should have to go out for my dinner . . . and that effort assumed the form of a desperate and dangerous quest. It appeared to me that I would rather remain dinnerless, would rather even starve than sally forth into the infernal town, where the natural fate of an obscure stranger would be to be trampled to death in Piccadilly and have his carcass thrown into the Thames.

But he assures us, he didn't starve, and the mood passed.

Hawthorne of course was writing on the spot, keeping a journal; James's essay "London" appeared many years after the

[1] COLLECTED TRAVEL WRITINGS: *The Continent*: A Little Tour in France; Italian Hours; Other Travels; *Great Britain and America*: English Hours; The American Scene; Other Travels, by *Henry James*. Ed. by *Richard Howard*. The Library of America, 2 vols., $35.00 each.

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visit in question. But James always moves toward accommodation, toward emotion recollected in the tranquility of composition, and toward a designed scene that may be savored—even the occasional grim bit of it—for its pictorial satisfactions. The relative density of his observations may be suggested by comparing him to Howells, whose *Italian Journeys* (1872) was published just a year before many of the essays in James's *Italian Hours* were written. As always Howells is a wholly agreeable writer who holds nothing back from us in the presence of, say, the Roman Campagna:

> We walked far down the dusty road beyond the city walls, and then struck out from the highway across the wild meadows of the Campagna. They were weedy and desolate, seamed by shaggy grass-grown ditches, and deeply pitted with holes made in search for catacombs. There was here and there a farm-house amid the wide lonesomeness, but oftener a round, hollow, roofless tomb, from which the dust and memory of the dead had long been blown away, and through the top of which—fringed and overhung with grass, and opening like a great eye—the evening sky looked marvelously sad.

This is perfectly lucid, and the effect of "marvelously sad" that of unabashedly direct confession. By contrast James's pages on the Campagna (in "Roman Rides") bristle with pictorial intent, the insistence that the scene come together into full display, as in his description of wandering near the Claudian Aqueduct:

> It stands knee-deep in the flower-strewn grass, and its rugged piers are hung with ivy as the columns of a church are draped for a festa. Every archway is a picture, massively framed, of the distance beyond—of the snow-tipped Sabines and lonely Soracte. As the spring advances the whole Campagna smiles and waves with flowers; but I think they are nowhere more rank and lovely than in the shifting shadow of the aqueducts, where they muffle the feet of the columns and smother the half-dozen brooks that wander in and out like silver meshes between the legs of a file of giants. They make a niche for themselves too in every crevice and tremble on the vault of the empty conduits.

Howells, whom the Campagna made marvelously sad, is also made to think of a "wood-pasture in Ohio" as he wearies himself on the "many-memoried ground." James looks at the fragments of Roman aqueduct and sees something less homey:

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"They seem the very source of the solitude in which they stand; they look like architectural spectres and loom through the light mists of their grassy desert, as you recede along the line, with the same insubstantial vastness as if they rose out of Egyptian sands." Or, instead of an Ohio wood-scape, he is reminded of Claude Lorrain's paintings, later betaking himself to the Doria Gallery to inspect a couple of them. This is the cosmopolitan speaking.

Most of the material in the travel books published late in James's career—*English Hours* (1905) and *Italian Hours* (1909)—appeared as essays, the early 1870s being an especially fertile period and marking, to my judgment, James's finest performances in the vein. These books were illustrated by Joseph Pennell's lovely sketches (preserved in The Library of America volumes) as was, when republished in 1900, *A Little Tour in France*. The usual word for the book on France is charming, as indeed it is, filled with chatty talk about HJ's weakness for provincial museums like the one he visits in Nantes, or how—on Romantic, "pictorial" principles—he prefers ruins to restorations. There are many picturesque portraits of ruins, including human ones like a poor old Army veteran who had served in Mexico, encountered near the walls of Carcasonne: "It seemed strange, as he sat there with those romantic walls behind him and the great picture of the Pyrenees in front, to think that he had been across the seas to the far-away world, had made part of a famous expedition, and was now a cripple at the gate of the medieval city where he had played as a child." This impression was evidently worth the "small silver coin" James pressed into his palm.

The preparations for writing *A Little Tour* (it was commissioned by an American publisher) weren't purely pleasureable, and James wrote brother William that "I pursued my pilgrimage through these rather dull French towns and through a good deal of bad weather . . . It is rather dreary work." It's the closest thing he ever wrote to a guidebook and could be useful still as a guide to southern France—there are especially attractive sections on the Pont du Gard, Avignon, and Vaucluse. *English Hours* on the other hand has no particular continuity from chapter to chapter as James goes here and there, at different times, always with a transforming imagination that

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turns everything from "tramps" to children in a workhouse ("the little multitude of staring and wondering, yet perfectly expressionless, faces") into art. Inevitably the presence of Dickens is pervasive, and after the opening of *Bleak House* it's brave of James to attempt a London fog with attendant snow:

> The thickness that draws down and absorbs the smoke of the housetops, causes it to hang about the streets in impenetrable density, forces it into one's eyes and down one's throat, so that one is half blinded and quite sickened . . . Just before Christmas, too, there was a heavy snowstorm, and even a tolerably light fall of snow had London quite at its mercy. The emblem of purity is almost immediately converted into a sticky lead-coloured mush, the cabs skulk out of sight or take up their stations before the lurid windows of a public house, which glares through the sleety darkness at the desperate wayfarer with an air of vulgar bravado.

This bit from an 1879 essay is continuous with the London he liked to call "the great, grey Babylon," and it appears in certain of his middle and later tales. Yet the movement of the writing is toward release, toward freedom: "For recovery of one's nervous balance the one course was flight—flight to the country and the confinement of one's vision to the large area of one of those admirable homes which by this season overflow with hospitality and good cheer." A dose of festive comedy is always ready to break into James's ultimately benign account of his traveling self.

Samuel Johnson was clear about the use of travel: "To regulate imagination by reality, and, instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are." A contemporary writer about travel books, Paul Fussell, agrees: "Travel books are a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker's encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative—unlike that in a novel or a romance—claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality." James's relation to actuality in *English Hours* and *A Little Tour in France* is everywhere responsibly evident; but in his writings about Italy that relation becomes especially satisfying and his style is felt in its most glowing warmth. Consider this tribute to Carpaccio's St. Jerome, in San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice:

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> It unites the most masterly finish with a kind of universal largeness of feeling, and he who has it well in his memory will never hear the name of Carpaccio without a throb of almost personal affection. Such indeed is the feeling that descends upon you in that wonderful little chapel of St. George of the Slaves, where the most personal and sociable of artists has expressed all the sweetness of his imagination. The place is small and incommodious, and the pictures are out of sight and ill-lighted, the custodian is rapacious, the visitors are mutually intolerable, but the shabby little chapel is a palace of art.

Here James is a guide of the most personal and sociable sort, unlike John Ruskin, who is very much looking over the guide's shoulder in Venice and Florence. With all due respect for his predecessor, James needs to push him away, even on occasions lecture Ruskin for the incessant way in which he lectures us. At one point, losing patience with Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence*, James finds himself taking pleasure, in his perambulation of Santa Maria Novella, of frescoes by Ghirlandio that Ruskin has been severe about. What Ruskin seems to forget, James says, is the delightful truth "that art after all is made for us and not we for art":

> And as for Mr. Ruskin's world being a place—his world of art—where we may take life easily, woe to the luckless mortal who enters it with any such disposition. Instead of a garden of delight, he finds a sort of assize court in perpetual session. Instead of a place in which human responsibilities are lightened and suspended, he finds a region governed by a kind of Draconian legislation.

He concludes, contra Ruskin, that "We are not under theological government."

Italian Hours contains some of James's ripest and wisest thought about the whole matter of "art," these thoughts expressed in an easy, graceful prose that is a perfect vehicle for them:

> It is the privilege of art to make us friendly to the human mind and not to make us suspicious of it. We do in fact as we grow older unstring the critical bow a little and strike a truce with invidious comparisons. We perceive a certain human solidarity in all cultivated effort, and are conscious of a growing accommodation of judgment. . . . We have in short less of a quarrel with the masters we don't delight in, and less of an impulse to pin all our faith on those

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> in whom, in more zealous days, we fancied that we made out peculiar meanings. The meanings no longer seem quite so peculiar.

This is the tone of a mature sensibility at ease with its own contents and with the actuality of various "cultivated efforts" seen in Italy and elsewhere—like the Torre del Mangia next to the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena:

> On the firm edge of the place, from bracketed base to grey-capped summit against the sky, there grows a tall slim tower which soars and soars till it has given notice of the city's greatness over the blue mountains that mark the horizon. It rises as slender and straight as a pennoned lance planted on the steel-shod toe of a mounted knight, and keeps all to itself in the blue air, far above the changing fashions of the market, the proud consciousness or rare arrogance once built into it.

There you have it, and James unerringly shares it with us. What a shock then to encounter, in the "late" part of "Siena Early and Late," the following second look at the city where he informs us that, after getting to know Siena better over the years, his earlier remarks have fallen short of doing her justice—

> True as it may be that I find ever a value, or at least an interest, even in the moods and humours and lapses of any brooding, musing or fantasticating observer to whom the finer sense of things is *on the whole* not closed. If he has on a given occasion nodded or stumbled or strayed, this fact by itself speaks to me of him—speaks to me, that is, of his faculty and his idiosyncrasies, and I care nothing for the application of his faculty unless it be, first of all, in itself interesting.

Whatever is he going on about, piling up those triple adjectives, spluttering, clearing his throat, italicizing "*on the whole*" as if all this were immensely significant? The answer of course is that the second half of "Siena Early and Late" was written in the first decade of this century and is thus an example of darkest late Jamesian "brooding" (an increasingly favored word by him). No longer, evidently, is he obliged, in Johnson's words, "to regulate imagination by reality" and see things as they are; no longer is "actuality" anything more than what the brooding analyst can construct out of his word-spinnings. The wonderfully relaxed power of the earlier travel writing is gone, its place occupied by a frantic exercise in dithyrambics.

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Where, then, does that leave *The American Scene* (1907), the fruit of James's ten-month visit to the United States he hadn't seen for twenty-five years? Established opinion judges it to be a masterpiece: "A triumph of the author's long practice," said Pound in his long essay on James; remarkable for its "exactitude," pronounced T. S. Eliot in his tribute to the Master. Ford Madox Ford called it a "magnificent book of impressions" though he admitted that one "reads for many pages with a sense of deep, of complete, and finally of utter noncomprehension." But, Ford claimed, when one closed the finished book an extraordinary sense of "actuality" overcomes one. Auden in his interesting preface to a 1946 edition of *The American Scene* called it "a prose poem of the first order." "One of his inestimable books and one of the great American documents," said F. W. Dupee. On the other side, standing more or less alone, there is Maxwell Geismar, author of the now pretty much forgotten *Henry James and the Jacobites* (1963), an assault on the James cult that was greeted by most people at the time with disdain. Since I was one of the disdainers, I confess that on a second perusal Geismar doesn't look so foolish. His remarks about *The American Scene* are centered where they should be, on James's "intensely wrought" (Dupee's words) late style about which Gesimar says, "Perhaps never have so many words been used for so little content; probably this is really James's worst-written, and mainly most vacant, empty, and chatterbox book; as though the writer's own consciousness as regards his lack of real knowledge about his ostensible subject has impelled him into almost hysterical bursts of verbal virtuosity."

It would be foolish to assume that all this can be sorted out by either analysis or fiat. But reading *The American Scene* in the context of James's earlier travel writing, rather than in the context of *The Golden Bowl* and *A Small Boy and Others*, made me wonder if Gesimar hadn't gotten on to something. One fairly long passage will have to do by way of illustrating the problem: it occurs just before James's often quoted outburst, "The *manners*, the manners: where and what are they, and what have they to tell?" and its subject is Cape Cod, "a delightful little triumph of 'impressionism' "

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> which, during my short visit at least, never departed, under any provocation, from its type. Its type, so easily formulated, so completely filled, was there the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning; there was rest for the mind—for that, certainly of the restless analyst—in having it so exactly under one's hand. After that one could read into it other meanings without straining or disturbing it. There was a couchant promontory in particular, half bosky with the evergreen boskage of the elegant kakemono, half bare with the bareness of refined, the *most* refined, New England decoration—a low, hospitable headland projected, as by some water-colourist master of the trick, into a mere brave wash of cobalt. It interfered, the sweet promontory, with its generous Boston bungalow, its verandahs still haunted with old summer-times, and so wide that the present could elbow and yet not jostle with the past—it interfered no whit, for all its purity of style, with the human, the social question always dogging the steps of the ancient contemplative person and making him, before each scene, wish really to get *into* the picture, to cross, as it were, the threshold of the frame.

Is it "exactitude" we have here, sentences from "a prose poem of the first order" that give at the end a marvelous sense of a place's "actuality"? Or is it cobweb (the word is Pound's, though not applied to this passage), obliterating in its chatterbox torrent of words any sense of place or actuality, making of the pictorial, the picturesqueness of which the early James is master, a mishmash of fussings on the part of this "restless analyst"—that epithet which James applies to himself with tedious and embarrassing frequency?[2] Auden says in his preface that travel writing is the genre most difficult for the artist because it deprives him of the freedom to invent, since his imagination must be checked by the reality he's attempting to render. If so, James in *The American Scene* demonstrated the freedom to invent at the expense of becoming something less—or more, if you feel that way—than a good travel writer.

Auden suggests it would be helpful to think of *The American Scene* as a fairy tale in which things—the landscape, a building, a mountain—speak to the restless analyst, invariably in the late-Jamesian accents. (For example, New Hampshire's Mt. Chocorua is heard to utter the following: "Live *with* me, somehow, and let us make out together what we may do for

[2] Contrast with this the lovely and lucid writing about Cape Cod in chapter 35 of *The Bostonians*.

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each other—something that is not merely estimable in more or less greasy greenbacks.") My own term for it, borrowed from Kenneth Burke, would be comedy of the grotesque, a comedy which at its best seems aware of the deeply offbeat, deeply mannerist nature of its perceptions. Here is the aging expatriate confronting what he sees as a distinctly American phenomenon, the excellence of our dental care:

> I remember to have heard it remarked by a French friend, of a young woman who had returned to her native land after some years of domestic service in America, that she had acquired there, with other advantages, *le sourire Californien*, and the "Californian" smile, indeed, expressed, more or less copiously, in undissimulated cubes of the precious metal, plays between lips that render scant other tribute to civilization. . . . Every one, in "society" has good, handsome, pretty, has above all cherished and tended, teeth; so that the offered spectacle, frequent in other societies, of strange irregularities, protrusions, deficiencies, fangs and tusks and cavities, is quite refreshingly and consolingly absent.

James finds the consequences "cumulatively charming," an accolade I'm quite willing to bestow on this passage, even if the cumulative effect of *The American Scene* strikes me as something else. No matter: with The Library of America's enterprising gathering together of this material there should be no excuse for anyone missing out on James the travel writer.

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CAROL HART

Growing Up German

No one had to tell me, growing up in the fifties, how to feel about being German. I knew it from TV and movies, from the embarrassment when grandparents spoke the language, from the way we boasted about being one-quarter Swiss and treated our Swiss-Ozark grandma, née Weidekahr, as the matriarch of both families. However, if anyone had challenged us on it, we would have claimed to be proud to be German. How could you not be proud to be what you were? In fact, we were proud about being tall and fair, with straight, healthy, well-formed bodies, and we might have thought the word "Aryan" about ourselves, though it was never said out loud without a deprecatory snigger. As for TV and movies, although we were Americans, on the side of the Americans, we might have been a little bit pleased that the Germans were so tough, so scary, so bad—kind of like the pleasure of being the Indian in a game of cowboys and Indians.

My grade school was named for the patron saint of Germany, St. Boniface, and most of my classmates had names like Schwartz, Schmidt, Kramer, Burgler, and Vorster, though the Vorsters claimed to be French. There was one Irish girl, named Shannon Casey, and I thought she was terribly exotic. My own name had four syllables and eleven letters in it; learning to spell it and to tie my shoes were the intellectual challenges of my preschool years.

Since the fifties were the decade of the melting pot, none of my classmates had German first names but were christened names like Maeva, Colleen, Annette, and Camille, which my mother thought tasteless. She had a definite philosophy of naming. You don't want to sound like you just got off the boat, she said, but you don't want names that clash, either. Hence my plain, fifties Carol, plus Ann for a saint's name, and for the musical roll that Southerners love in names. Carol Ann Boren-

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gasser. Still an ugly name, but the best my mother could do, given the materials she had to work with.

My father had a joke he liked to tell. A Frenchman, an Englishman, and a German are arguing about the beauty of their respective languages. The Englishman says, "Just listen to the sound of this word: butterfly. Butterfly. What a beautiful name for a beautiful creature." The Frenchman answers, "Mais non. Papillon. Zat is a truly beautiful word. Papillon, not 'butterfly.' " Then the German says, "Und vat iss wrong mit 'Schmetterling'?"

My father never told many war stories. There is one about "liberating" a French wine cellar, a story so stock in trade he might have acquired it on the boat home, as he did his souvenir Nazi captain's hat and Prussian WW I helmet. There is the story I always liked, about how he once got orders to report the next day for duty as a front-line rifleman, and how another set of orders appeared two hours later, ordering him back to an army intelligence base far behind the front, to serve as a German translator. My father knew almost no German but he was no fool. He tore up the first set of orders and made his appearance at the base the next day. By the time his new superiors discovered he didn't know German, despite his name, he had already demonstrated his typing and spelling skills, and so was allowed to stay.

My father only liked to tell funny or triumphant war stories. I knew how he had barely escaped being shipped to the Battle of the Bulge by a case of chicken pox, but he didn't tell me until I was grown how terrifying it was being deep in the hold of the transport ship while it was being bombed, and how his new regiment despised and mistreated him because of his name. And he told me only once, much later on, that he had gone to one of the concentration camps shortly after it had been liberated. He said some of the prisoners were still there, pitiful looking, starved down to bones. He said he saw a room where the Nazis had strangled them by hanging them from the neck on meat hooks, and he could see the marks where they had clawed at the cement of the wall in their agony.

To me it is a mystery, one of *the* mysteries that you struggle with all your life, that my father could see such things and appreciate their horror, and yet still believe that the rich Jews in

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New York run the country, and get us involved with Israel to serve their own dark purposes. It makes me think that the word prejudice is wrong, shallow, because no amount of judgment or reason can ever overpower such ideas. It makes me think that anti-Semitism might serve some basic human need, not just for my father.

Back at St. Boniface in seventh grade we read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. We liked the book but we didn't see what all the fuss was about. The teacher, Sister Annunciata, kept going on about how mature Anne Frank was for her age—our age—and what a fine mind she had, and such interesting, grown-up thoughts. We had all had similar thoughts, and said so. We were jealous that this Jewish girl was getting all this attention and being made out to be better than we were. We thought it was just because she had died. What I learned, or understood, was that the Germans didn't like Jews and made them live in overcrowded camps where a lot of them, like Anne Frank, had gotten sick and died. There were no Jews in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and I didn't quite understand what they were. I asked once why the Jews didn't read the second half of the Bible so they'd know that Jesus was the Messiah. I don't remember getting a satisfactory answer.

There were three Catholic grade schools for white children in Fort Smith, plus a tiny fourth one for the black Catholics, but only one high school, St. Anne's. It was the sixties, the time of forced integration, but St. Anne's had integrated voluntarily some years back. There may have been differences of opinion about whether blacks were equal or inferior, but these blacks were Catholics, and we weren't about to let the Baptists get hold of their souls, so they went to the one Catholic high school with the rest of us.

At St. Anne's, we no longer had to go to Mass but we still had an hour of Religion class every day. It was team taught by a priest and a nun who believed they knew how to communicate with the New Generation. They vacillated between playing *Jesus Christ Superstar* for us and showing endless movies portraying the tragic consequences of teenage sex and pregnancy.

One day when we showed up for class, Sister Helen announced that the mail order company had sent the wrong movie by mistake. The one they had sent was "a real downer"

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but since it was an expensive movie and it was all they had, they were going to show it anyway.

It was *Night and Fog*, Alain Resnais's documentary on the camps. In my entire life, up to that moment, nothing had ever prepared me to see horrors so beyond all nightmares. I was instantly, mercifully amnesiac for the heaps of nude bodies, mangled and starved, but not beyond recognition—still terribly recognizable as human, with faces you could imagine passing in the street or even meeting. The images of the stockpiled gold teeth, shoes and shorn hair—the senseless mania for saving and organizing the body parts and possessions of the dead—have stayed with me forever. As I watched, I had a terrible sense of recognition that I have fought hard to suppress. I thought I saw a family resemblance with the murderers. The obsession with cleanliness, with cataloging and collecting, the fussy precision of the whole thing—weren't these German traits that I knew about and lived with?

The class was totally silent, traumatized, during the film and hysterical afterwards. A boy I had despised as a mindless jock led the attack on the astonished nun and priest. "Why weren't we ever told about this before," he said. "We never knew that anything like that had ever happened. We should have been told." Father Davis and Sister Helen had been thirsting to have some spirited let-it-all-hang-out exchanges with us all semester. Now that they had finally stirred us up, they didn't know what to do with it. "We lived through all of that," they said, kind of sheepishly. "It was so long ago, another era. We thought it was time it was forgotten." No one in that room of Schmidts, Schlaffs, and Borengassers said anything about race. This was the sixties. Race was an illusion, an obscenity, and an archaism. We were all the same. I even wrote a poem about it, soon after *Night and Fog*. In it I said we were all Germans and we were all Jews, both responsible and victimized at once. The poem won a prize locally, which made me feel better about being German, but still not sure that I could be a Jew.

Ethnicity was a stark, straightforward affair back where and when I grew up. You fit into two overlapping categories: you were either white or black, Catholic or non-Catholic. As a child, I was fascinated by the paradoxes presented by these catego-

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ries: which was better, or worse, a black Catholic or a white Baptist? A black Catholic was saved, but did not come into our living room or sit at our table, though a white Baptist, who could hope for no better than limbo, if not a hot seat in hell, could and did. My ethnic assumptions have always been askew because, growing up Southern and Catholic as well as German-American, the enemy—my "them"—was neither the blacks nor the Jews but the Baptists, whom we called "the Holy Rollers."

As Southern white Catholics, we had all the advantages of a persecuted minority (we were special, we were chosen) and none of the disadvantages (we looked the same, we could blend). When I spelled my name to a store clerk and saw a shadow pass over her face, I was sure that the thought was "Catholic" not "Kraut." I did not know there could be meaningful discriminations of race beyond white and black, Catholic and non-Catholic. There was a Japanese girl in the grade above me, and a Puerto Rican in my class, but I always assumed they were just different shades of white.

When I made my escape from Arkansas at eighteen to a college full of New Yorkers and New Jerseyites, I was surprised to learn how rich and varied ethnicity was for them. With a little prodding, my new friends came out with a huge font of ethnic expressions. For the first time, I learned about Puerto Rican fence climbers (PFCs—high top sneakers), a Polish bankroll (a wallet full of $1's), Irish twins (siblings born within a year of each other), wop tops (big heads of wavy black hair) and Jew canoes (Cadillacs). I knew better than to repeat them, but to me these slurs were innocent and enchanting. They introduced Technicolor to my black-and-white world. I did notice that no one seemed to know any cute expressions about Germans, and the whole issue of ethnic identity raised a worry. Did I, too, have an ethnicity, some kind of innate cultural, or even genetic, predisposition? Was I . . . German?

For the first time, also, people made fun of my name, or simply rolled their eyes when I said it. Fort Smith had been full of Borengassers (Catholics multiply like rabbits, you know) and no one there had considered it either odd or amusing. I began to be embarrassed and to wish to blend.

I met Jews at college, too, lots of them. To me they seemed the same as everybody else, all the Northerners, that is: loud,

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vulgar, friendly, frank, dark-haired and dark-eyed. All were new qualities to me, who had grown up with: reticent, polite, secretive, withdrawn, and fair-complexioned. My new friends were amused and touched by my innocence when I would say of someone, who might have a hooked nose, thick curly black hair, and a name like Saul Steinberg: "Oh, he's Jewish? I didn't know that."

I met my first husband in college and married him the day after graduation. He was from Scarsdale and his name was Stillman but he was Catholic and English, not Jewish, and we were married by a priest. Years after we divorced, my mother said to me, shyly, "Carol . . . was Robert Jewish?" When I laughed she explained that I had originally said that his mother was Catholic but his father was "something else." By this I meant he was some kind of nonpracticing Protestant, but my parents had taken it to mean he was Jewish, and that it was a source of embarrassment and something not to be discussed.

After we parted ways, I went on through the world still calling myself Carol Stillman, a name I liked for both its euphony and its ambiguous ethnicity. No one needed to know that I read books on the Holocaust while listening to Wagner and worrying about my Teutonicness.

If you are Irish, it is all right to "get your Irish up." If, however, you are German, do you dare to get your German up? Were my murderous fantasies more or less murderous than anybody else's? I couldn't tell. I led a mousy, inoffensive life, just to be sure. I was vegetarian, I avoided stepping on ants, I detested violence in films.

In my tight-lipped family you might wonder about something for years without asking, if there was any chance that asking might cause offense or embarrassment, exposing something private either in you or the other person. My mother didn't ask me if my husband was half-Jewish. I never asked her or my father how they felt about being German. Actually, I didn't need to ask: I could tell.

My father is a shy man with a quick wit and a drinking problem. He didn't drink continually; he might abstain for months or even a year before something happened that got to him and sent him back to the bottle again. Always, it had to do with being mistreated by someone. His response was to be hurt,

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and to bathe his narcissistic injury in cheap whiskey, but I think he really drank to keep from killing someone. My father's rage terrified him, taking the projected form of a burglar or boogey who stalked him in the dark. He had at least a dozen cheap handguns, and never went anywhere, except maybe church, without one. My father is a sensitive person who recoils not only from violence but even from bad language. I remember his shocked rebukes when I let a goddamnit slip out in front of him.

During my atheistical adolescence, my mother would argue with me about God. She didn't point to the presence of beauty or love in the world to prove his existence. Instead, she argued that the social order would break down without the fear of religion to keep people in their places, which seemed a very Germanic idea to me. She would put on what she intended to be a wicked, worldly smile, and allude vaguely to forbidden pleasures she would grab for herself if she wasn't certain there was a God and a hell to punish her for it. I couldn't imagine my mother as anything other than drably virtuous, and idly wondered which mortal sins she contemplated. Adultery? Murder? Stealing? Probably stealing. If she went into a store carrying a shopping bag, Mother would always open it and show it to the cashier on the way out, to prove she wasn't shoplifting.

I tagged along by her side and kept close to home throughout my early years, playing only with the two Catholic girls next door. I was a miserable athlete as a kid, clumsy, uncoordinated, and inured to failure. My own body, small and weak though it was, frightened me with its instincts and impulses. I experienced myself as a tiny, terrified pilot sitting in a control room located behind my eyes, pulling levers and throwing switches, barely managing to keep that unwieldy dangerous machine, my body, under control.

Not surprisingly, I didn't manage to learn how to drive a car at the usual age. Robert Stillman taught me how, when I finally needed a car to get to work. Besides being uncoordinated, and not understanding which way to turn the wheel while backing up, I was terrified that someone would throw a baby in front of my car and I would run over it. It was a long time before I stopped feeling a rush of guilt whenever another car honked or a pedestrian shouted at someone across the street.

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When I reached thirty I made myself take up jogging, grimly, for the sake of my thighs and my heart. Every step was an effort—I had to command my body to go forward—until I finally discovered the secret. I would fantasize that someone in a passing car gratuitously insulted me. I answered back, and we got into a fistfight, which I, somewhat absurdly, won. As I imagined scoring my punches (sometimes I hit my opponent with a board or a brick), I was filled with energy, my muscles unknotted, and I ran with grace, speed, and exuberance. I made friends with my own aggression, finally, owning up to it and accepting it without knowing, even yet, whether it is a German trait or only a human one.

I also made friends with a woman rabbi and fell in love with a Jew with an English name. My friend the rabbi married us. Jake (Jacob), a lawyer, is a killer in the courtroom, but he leaves his guns at the door when he comes home. If there is something I want very much, which he opposes, I have to be careful that I don't run him over with my troops and tanks, because he will not defend himself against me. It takes self-control, of which I have lots.

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RICHARD HORNBY

New Plays in Louisville

TONY KUSHNER WRITES SUCH MALLEABLE PLAYS that parts of them even get recycled. His latest work, *Slavs!*, which premiered in March at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, incorporates a character, a scene, and some themes from the second part of his hit play *Angels in America* (still running on Broadway at the time of the Festival), yet manages to emerge brand new.

Angels in America was relentlessly open-ended. Prior Walter, infected with AIDS at the beginning of the play, seems forever at death's door, but never dies, despite some powerful death scenes. Characters who do die off—Prior's ancestors, Louis' grandmother, and the outrageous Roy Cohn—come back as ghosts. The play yokes opposing concepts like death and life, homosexuality and heterosexuality, religion and atheism, naturalism and surrealism, comedy and tragedy, and leaves them unreconciled, with the result that the play spins on for seven hours. Kushner revised *Angels* for productions in Los Angeles, London, San Francisco, Los Angeles again, and New York, responding to suggestions from directors, actors, and *dramaturgs*. Declaring himself fed up with the play, he has since opined that in a few years he will have to revisit the characters, to see how they are doing! Kushner seems forever unable to bring his material to closure, perhaps because the realities it reflects are themselves unresolvable.

Slavs! begins in Russia in 1985, as the Communist system is collapsing. In a series of ironic scenes, aging bureaucrats in shiny blue suits overloaded with medals sip tea and bemoan the politics of Perestroika. "Geriatrical materialism" is now their cause; "stagnation is our only hope." In a scene lifted from *Angels*, a blind old apparatchik named Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov deplores the loss of the beautiful, bold, comprehensive Communist Theory, "Praxis, True Praxis, True Theory married to Actual Life," in place of which Perestroika offers market incentives and American cheeseburgers. In the next scene, he has a moment of religious awakening: "God is a Menshevik, a petit bourgeois!" In ecstasy, the gassy old fool drops dead, quickly followed by a slightly younger colleague.

So far, then, the play is on the level of a "Saturday Night Live" sketch or an early Woody Allen film, amiably silly, an atmosphere that never totally disappears but which eventually frames serious events. A lesbian archivist, in charge of cataloguing the embalmed brains of

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famous dead comrades, is pursued by yet another aging male bureaucrat. She submits in order to get cigarettes, but has a female lover who is a pediatric oncologist. We then cut to Siberia, where the lover has been exiled by the jealous bureaucrat. In her medical examining room sits a mute, sickly little girl. Toxic and nuclear waste are here everywhere in the countryside; the girl is "a third generation nuclear mutant." A government official sent to investigate deplores the chaos that is overtaking Russia, blaming it all (of course) on "the international Jew." In this ghastly world, only the oncologist and her lover (the former brain curator) demonstrate human decency and common sense. An epilogue set in Heaven, a dark and gloomy place rather like Russia itself, has the two dead old men from the beginning of the play sitting around playing cards, and, as before, complaining. The little girl arrives, dead of cancer, and even *she* spouts political philosophy, which is beginning to sound like a Russian curse. The final philosophical quotation, taken from Lenin, poses an unanswerable question: "What Is to Be Done?" The ending of the play is, as always, open.

Slavs! thus wanders all over the place in space, time, character, and subject matter, simultaneously hilarious and sorrowful, yet it is ultimately unified, coming together with a big question for which neither Russia nor we have any answer. What *is* to be done, about pollution, bigotry, violence, corruption in government, economic stagnation? Kushner has an exuberant but ultimately disciplined imagination. *Slavs!*, like *Angels*, is a "gay fantasia" (with the gays this time being female), but the homosexuality and the fantasy are connected to larger issues. *Slavs!* is both a political cartoon and a personal *cri du coeur*.

The other plays at Louisville were less adventuresome than *Slavs!*. While it takes courage for a theatre company to do new plays at all in the United States, much less an entire repertory of them, the Humana Festival is not noted for conspicuously original pieces. Although playwrights chosen for production there dabble in various dramatic genres, including the fashionably avant-garde, the dominant style is psychological realism. A typical Festival play stresses personal concerns over political, economic, historical, or spiritual ones. Even when the subject is itself historical, the focus is on private lives; perhaps because the ATL is named for *Actors* (and the acting is often superb), the emphasis is on what makes individuals tick, rather than on how government or society or the universe functions. This is apparent in Festival plays in the past that have gone on to success elsewhere, such as D. L. Coburn's *The Gin Game*, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, Jon Pielmeier's *Agnes of God*, and John Patrick Shanley's *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*; aside from *Slavs!* (which might never have been chosen were it not for the success of *Angels in America*), it was certainly true of the 1994 Festival.

The tendency toward the narrowly personal could be seen most conspicuously in Jon Lipsky's *The Survivor*. Based on the memoir *A*

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Cambodian Odyssey, by Haing Ngor and Roger Warner, it concerns Ngor's Academy Award-winning performance in the move *The Killing Fields*. Ngor was a physician who had escaped Cambodia to come to Los Angeles, where he was recruited for the film role of Dith Pran, the friend and interpreter of a reporter covering Cambodia for the *New York Times*. When the Khmer Rouge triumphed, the reporter left Pran behind, to be brutally treated by the rebel government. The irony shown in the play is that Ngor's own experiences with the Khmer Rouge were far worse than those of the real-life character he was playing in the film. Abused, beaten, starved, and tortured, he was twice near death, but the worst experience was not something that happened to him, but something that he did: Since all former professionals were marked for death, he survived only by pretending to be a member of the working class, a taxi driver. When his wife was dying from complications in childbirth, he thus had to hide his medical knowledge and skill, although he might well have saved her and their child.

The sufferings of Ngor and his wife are depicted in grim detail. There is conflict between Ngor and a former friend who becomes a Khmer Rouge collaborator, but otherwise *Survivor* is a simple tale of endurance, monotone in mood and linear in plot. There is too much narrative, of events that should have been depicted through action, and a surprising lack of irony, despite the obvious contrasts between the blasé filmmakers and the horrors they are filming. Worst of all, the play is utterly ahistorical, attempting no explanation at all of the *causes* of the Cambodian catastrophe, the worst case of mass murder since the Holocaust. The Khmer Rouge never appear onstage except in brief vignettes, yielding the impression that all the misery is caused by inhuman, invisible forces. They might as well be a natural disaster like a hurricane or an earthquake.

Thus, although *Survivor* seems at first glance to be the sort of Epic Theatre piece popularized by Bertolt Brecht, with its historical sweep and political implications, it is in most ways the sort of work that Brecht despised, isolating individuals in a historical vacuum, focussing on their plight rather than on the causes of it, and implying that the evil humans do to one another is inevitable and unchangeable. Brecht also hated moody, atmospheric plays that stimulated emotion rather than analysis, particularly attacking the shadowy lighting effects so popular in the German theatre in the twenties and thirties. The Louisville production of *Survivor* was so dimly lit that, sitting far up in the balcony of the ATL's large Pamela Brown Auditorium, I thought I had developed cataracts. Way below, some indistinct actors were agonizing a lot, but I never thought that they had anything to do with me.

Another overly personalized piece was *My Left Breast*, written and performed by Susan Miller. "Performance Art" used to denote the kind of non-literary visual extravaganzas staged by directors like

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Martha Clarke or Richard Foreman, but lately has also come to signify the work of monologists who come out and tell you their life story. Miller is a gentle, pleasant woman of fifty, whose story primarily concerns the loss of her breast to a cancer operation thirteen years ago, although the fact that she is a lesbian single parent certainly adds interest. It would be hard not to sympathize with her, as she details not only the operation and the emotional devastation, but also the side effects of the elaborate chemotherapy, including repeatedly broken ribs from osteoporosis. Nevertheless, her monologue, about an hour long, is ultimately unrevealing. Her son, mentioned several times, remains a shadowy figure, and her repeated failed love affairs imply that she is either incredibly unlucky in her choice of partners, or else that there are darker aspects to her personality that she is hiding. Nor are the larger issues of feminism, gay liberation, or the American health care crisis ever explored. As with *Survivor*, the piece generates pathos rather than insight.

1969 is a collectively evolved work, directed by Tina Landau, a disciple of Anne Bogart, a fashionable director of ensemble compositions who will be in residence at ATL next year. Landau's and Bogart's method involves taking a theme and working it up into a production by using ideas from the performers themselves. Although collective creation sounds egalitarian and politically correct, it amounts to art by committee, so that, even when the performers and director are talented (as they certainly were here), the result is bland and diffuse.

1969, set in an American high school in that year, comes off as an amalgam of the TV show "Happy Days" and the film *Revenge of the Nerds*. Howie Raskin, a wimpy senior, is browbeaten by the jocks who run the school. Not a particularly good student, his life is made miserable by pressures to conform. The one teacher who treats him decently is summarily fired because of mildly radical attitudes. There are rebels in the school, including a hippy boy and girl who smoke dope, play rock music, and talk raunchy. Howie runs away to New York with the girl; she gets cold feet and returns home, but he gets to the City, where, in a homosexual awakening, he takes up with a Puerto Rican transvestite prostitute.

As a production, *1969* was superb. Despite being performed in the ATL's tiny Victor Jory Theatre, it was visually striking, with wonderful sixties costumes designed by Laura Patterson, and clever scenic and lighting effects by Paul Owen and Mary Louise Geiger. There were hilarious dream sequences counterpointing the banal world of the high school, plus energetic rock music and dance numbers. Nevertheless, the piece suffers not so much from a weak script as a non-script, a mere scenario or collage. Scenes proceed almost at random, cataloguing sixites clichés like drugs, flower children, and emotional gush, with serious issues like racial injustice or the Viet Nam War way in the background or nonexistent. When the play

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finally comes into focus, at the end, the emphasis is once again on the personal, in this case Howie's sexuality. This seems wrong-headed even on its own terms, since Howie has always seemed straight-arrow nerdy rather than effeminate or sensual, asexual rather than homosexual. *1969* condescends toward history, first treating it in superficial terms, and then awkwardly turning it into a vehicle for a fashionable 1994 subject.

The title character of Wendy Hammond's *Julie Johnson* is a New Jersey housewife with two children and an alcoholic husband, who decides to better herself. She kicks the husband out, starts taking courses toward a high school equivalency diploma, and aspires to go to college and become a computer scientist. Supporting herself by cleaning houses, and aided by a kindly but reticent math teacher, she gets her degree and qualifies for a scholarship at Stevens Tech. Meanwhile, a waitress friend estranged from *her* loutish husband has moved in, and Julie gradually comes to realize that she is in love with her. The two briefly become lovers, until the friend, in a fit of homophobic self-loathing, goes back to her husband.

Julie was one of four plays at the Festival involving lesbianism, and the only one to deal with its psychological or social implications. Gracefully directed by Jon Jory, Producing Director of ATL, and superbly acted by Lily Knight as Julie, Carolyn Swift as the girlfriend, and V Craig Heidenreich as the hilariously uptight teacher, the play had humor and charm on the level of a good television sitcom. Its weakness is that, while Julie's love life is full of complications and reversals, her intellectual development is a one-way elevator ride upward. As in the movie *Stand and Deliver*, mathematics is presented as a means to self-advancement, rather than as something beautiful and fascinating for its own sake, which can transform the student spiritually rather than just improve her lot materially. Mathematical study can be just as beautiful—and just as horrible—as a love affair, and can change your life forever. In the play, Julie's two kinds of self-realization clash with each other, when they could be mutually reinforcing.

Jon Klein's *Betty the Yeti* is another sitcom, slighter than *Julie Johnson*, which deals with the declining logging industry in Oregon. An unemployed logger camps out in the woods, railing against the environmentalists who have destroyed his livelihood. He is visited by a variety of offbeat characters: his mother-in-law (a contractor who never met a stand of timber she didn't want to cut down), his estranged wife, her boyfriend (an environmental activist who dislikes the outdoors), and a female Japanese forest ranger. There is much discussion of the problems of the logging industry, which failed to reduce me to tears. Then, a female yeti appears, a relative, apparently, of the Himalayan Abominable Snowman. Betty the Yeti, as she is called, is hairy, brutish, and speechless, but she wins the logger's heart, while developing an Americanized taste for consumer goods.

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Despised by both loggers and environmentalists (she attracts too many onlookers, and is not a member of an official endangered species), she is shot dead at the end of the play, after having borne the logger's child. The play is entertaining fluff, with no bite to its satire or depth to its characters, made palatable by its strong cast, particularly Caroline Swift as Betty, in a wonderful shaggy costume designed by Laura Patterson.

Phyllis Nagy's *Trip's Cinch* is a short play, performed on a double bill with *Slavs!*, that is inspired by the problematic rape and sexual harassment cases of recent years. Benjamin Trip, a wealthy businessman, has been recently acquitted of raping a working-class woman he met at a resort. A female professor interviews him, and later the supposed victim, as research for a book she is writing about the case. The professor is famous herself for her controversial writings, and seems less interested in finding the truth than in indulging in verbal joustings, managing to alienate both of her interviewees. The final scene is a flashback to the actual encounter, which turns out to be different from the way both characters have described it, but still remains ambiguous; was it rape or was it seduction?

I liked the Pirandellian indefiniteness of the play, which recalled Oscar Wilde's statement that the truth is rarely pure and never simple. I found the professor heavy going, however, a lifeless satire of the aggressive feminist writers who get so much publicity these days. Nagy even gives her a lesbian past, which seemed to be thrown in to be fashionable rather than to be dramatic. I also found the two principals, though well played by Mary Shultz and Steven Culp, unpleasantly predictable; they too lacked independent life, tending to become walking personifications of the *Times* Op-Ed page. *Trip's Cinch* has possibilities, if fleshed out to full length; unlike most ATL plays, it needs more emphasis on personal specifics and less on social issues.

Romulus Linney's *Shotgun* starts like a Noël Coward play. A couple are undergoing an amicable divorce so that the wife can marry the husband's best friend. The settlement has been worked out, via a mediator, in a spirit of generosity and civility, without a trace of bitterness; these are people, it seems, whose emotions are entirely under control. Recognizing the impossibility of the situation, the audience starts laughing immediately, anticipating the inevitable cracks in the rational façade. The cracks are not slow to appear, but because Linney is a humorless writer, the play skews toward tragedy instead of comedy of manners.

The play is set in the couple's vacation home, which they are now going to divide on a time-share basis. John, the husband, has invited his parents, divorced for over twenty years, to tell them the news. The elderly pair are of course surprised, but confide some equally surprising news of their own—they are going to remarry. Mellowed by years of psychotherapy, they have come to see the value of each other and their relationship.

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Into this ersatz Garden of Eden comes a serpent in the form of a shotgun, which John has ordered from a local pawn shop. He wanted it because it resembled one he used to have as a child. Not content with the gun, he has also purchased an old, split-bamboo fishing rod and a fly-making kit, regressing to his childhood with alarming speed. It soon becomes clear that he never got over his parents' divorce, that he is only pretending to accept the loss of his wife now, and that he is deeply troubled emotionally. His father begs him to forget the past, preaching the benefits of therapy and the numerous self-help and liberation movements of today; formerly something of a bigot and male chauvinist, he now is an enthusiastic supporter of gay rights, women's rights, and so on. His son argues that his father has it all wrong, that nowadays "Blacks hate Jews and Jews hate blacks, Moslems want to blow you up, Asians want your job," and the world is rapidly going to Hell.

The denouement occurs after John, arguing bitterly with the other four characters, storms out. His wife and his friend go after him; his mother and father begin to get cozy, and also go off, in their case to make love. John returns and, assuming that the sounds of lovemaking are coming from his wife and friend, painstakingly assembles the shotgun, and shoots his parents dead at their moment of orgasm.

Shotgun thus strives toward Aristotelian tragedy, in which a hero, in a state of blindness, kills those nearest and dearest to him. The classical aspirations were underlined by the setting, designed by Paul Owen, which employed three doors under a pediment as a façade, in the manner of ancient Greek and Roman theatres (though built of unfinished wood, in the manner of a rustic cabin). There was also an obvious parallel with Hamlet killing Polonius in the arras scene, foreshadowed earlier when the friend actually compares John to the Dane. For all the literary and theatrical allusions, however, *Shotgun* fails to engage us as tragedy. Not only do John's crass imprecations pale in contrast with Hamlet's existential speculation, his plight is never appealing. First, John seems ridiculously agreeable; then, he seems a Fascist. We never identify with him. I have always been impressed by Linney's independence; his plays (unlike most chosen by the ATL) do not follow fashionable trends, and are unashamedly literary or historical. Nevertheless, despite his large dramatic output (13 long and 22 short plays), his playwriting often seems awkward. Conflicts are undeveloped, unresolved, or (as here) badly balanced and paced. *Shotgun* certainly has a beginning, middle, and end, but the revelations and reversals come too fast (this is certainly a busy day in John's life!), while the motivations for the tragic action are too crude to be interesting. The tragic plot seems forced onto the material, rather than arising naturally from it. Still, Linney deserves credit for attempting something beyond the narrow focus of most other ATL playwrights.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Reality Check

So Morley Safer takes it on the chin for speculating about the integrity of an art world that stomachs the likes of Jeff Koons, purveyor of Hoover uprights under glass and porcelain replicas of Michael Jackson. Then we hear that the Guggenheim Museum under Thomas Krens, which recently expanded its facilities in a grand manner, has raked in $50 million toward its $100 million capital campaign goal—and will forthwith reduce its staff by ten percent, curtail its hours, and tailor down its exhibition schedule. At a winter symposium on the future of American museums, Whitney director David Ross admits that he no longer feels comfortable with "just" putting paintings up on museum walls, given the social and political turmoil of our time (as if the two concerns were mutually exclusive, anyway), and the Metropolitan Museum provides us with that most urgent of art-historical exhibitions, "The Golden Age of Danish Painting." Koons, Krens, Ross, Christian Købke and the lesser lights of nineteenth-century Copenhagen: where is it all heading? Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice had occasion to say.

In the 1980s, it was hard enough to convince my non-arty friends—a generally inquiring, literate bunch—to take the art world seriously. If it wasn't Mary Boone's closet of shoes profiled in *People* magazine, it was Mark Kostabi's factory of original non-original art on the nightly news; or it was Julian Schnabel's witless oil-on-velvet canvases straight out of a Vegas gift shop, or David Salle's soft-porn doodles, or the Met trying to tell us that late twentieth-century Americans had anything to learn from Frederic Remington or yet another big Impressionist show. You could talk about Sean Scully or Joan Snyder, Ed Clark or Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, Christopher Wilmarth or Dorothea Rockbourne, until you were blue in the face. The skeptics knew what made it into the hot galleries, the Biennials, the art magazines, the name collections. They knew how the museums alternated between playing it safe to the point of stupefaction and pushing further down the road of terminal hip-ness. In the nineties, it only got worse, and so the question remains: Why would an adult with an interest in good novels, the best new films, modern dance, and serious music want to spend time on an aspect of experience that seems so intellectually impoverished, visually unsatisfying, glib and demeaning?

One of the best responses to this periodic sense of defeat, I've

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found, and maybe the only hope for the friends who have long since concluded that *the whole thing* is a scam, is a leisurely, highly selective excursion to the galleries—the ones where the hype is, at least on occasion, less important than the art and the artist. Such an outing doesn't make for any Pollyanna idealism; there is as much bad or dull art being exhibited in our day as there ever was, but it does clear the air a bit, exercise and refresh the eye, intimate that the gnomes aren't running the show top to bottom.

The Spanish Harlem paintings of the late Alice Neel at the Robert Miller Gallery were an agreeable starting-point. This winter exhibition focused on Neel's portraits from the 1940s and 1950s, a good two decades before she became an elderly art star (of sorts), and shows her at work with a much darker palette than she used in her best paintings of the 1960s and 1970s but with an equivalent sense of honesty and strong brushwork. It wasn't surprising to learn that the subjects of these grave and never sentimental pictures were her friends and tenement neighbors as Neel managed that particularly rare feat for a contemporary artist, i.e., finding the right middle ground between an emotional connection with the human being in front of her and the demands of an unacademic, Modernist style. Too many of Neel's contemporaries are obviously more interested in art than people or the life around them, while second-rate talents rely on feeling to take the place of wit and skill. But Alice Neel, a tempest-tossed soul herself, wasn't burdened by either handicap. These are Kokoschka portraits by way of Raphael Soyer, a strange blend of Soutine and William H. Johnson. *T. B. Harlem* reminds us of a later Neel image of another wounded soul covered in medical gauze, the famous Andy Warhol portrait after Valerie Solanas' attempt on his life, but there is something more heartfelt and assertive about the earlier picture—perhaps it is simply a matter of less gloss and more homey, urgent reality. With Warhol, Neel was dealing with a self-invented mythic figure, and her lush style reflects something of that bubbly aura. With this anonymous tubercular friend in Harlem, a patch over the brown skin of his chest, we are closer to the pain most of us know and respond to. Limited color, compressed composition, edgy brushstrokes: with no sense of exploitation or sensationalism, we are drawn into the dignified struggle and the slowly retracting world of the terminally ill. Van Gogh once remarked that François Millet painted his peasants with the colors of the earth they tilled. Alice Neel painted her subjects with the soot on the windowsills and the grime of the streets.

The Fuller Building on East 57th Street, where the Alice Neel show was on view through March, was the site of several other exhibitions of note at the same time. The William Bailey retrospective at André Emmerich was a slightly tepid affair, a triumph of exacting craft more than pictorial drama, while the Robert Zakanitch exhibition upstairs at Jason McCoy had more than its share of drama and not quite

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enough exacting craft. Both artists are easy (too easy?) to enjoy, but it would be all the better if just a little of Mr. Bailey's restraint worked its way into Mr. Zakanitch's paint-frenzied Pattern Art picnics and a little of Mr. Zakanitch's energy found its way into the austere still-life tableaux of the Bailey household. At the Schmidt-Bingham Gallery, though, Idelle Weber's most recent paintings are practically a model of austerity and energy working together at their oxymoronic best. These Long Island landscapes of varying sizes give us the tidal marshes, the quickly shifting cloud formations over the water, the scrub brush and the morning haze, all with just enough light and specificity to ensure our understanding of the scene (and how rapidly it will change). Nothing, including the amount of paint applied to the canvas, is overdone. Atmospheric effect is everything, with each canvas restricted to two or three dominant colors. But what a powerful meagerness! (As the poet John Yau astutely observed in a brief catalogue note, these landscapes might even be taken from a distance as monotypes rather than paintings.) This from a woman who was a charter member of the Pop Art/Photo Realist camp, painting highly detailed renderings of picnic litter and other tacky bits of Americana (see *The Hudson Review*, Vol. XLIV, Autumn 1991, p. 466)—for range alone, Weber deserves more attention. For providing that intellectual rapport that Jeff Koons and David Salle work so hard to deny, that embattled sense that aesthetic experiences still mean something, she deserves enthusiasm and gratitude.

The healthy overlap of politics and art was the undercurrent of an exhibition at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery devoted to Philip Evergood. *American Tragedy* of 1936 is the best known of the several paintings in this small, choice show (if one can refer to any Evergood today as being known at all), and it was satisfying to observe that it holds up as well as any Depression-era art document. Inspired by an especially violent police attack on a crowd of strikers in Chicago, Evergood's depiction of the event has the odd, stylized manner of a frieze, with most of the action taking place in a line at the front of the picture. But really it's in the invented details that the artist stamps the image as his own. A black man on the ground clutches a small American flag (the attack took place on Memorial Day), a straw hat lies in the dirt ready to be trampled by so many agitated feet, and the mass of crisp blue uniforms against the yellow of the earth and the red of the blood being spilled makes for a useful contrast. In fact, Evergood is a never entirely satisfying draftsman as his distortions of anatomy aren't always convincing, but in his color, sometimes unapologetically obvious or garish, he does some remarkable things. *Dowager in a Wheelchair* sees affluent, post-Depression, postwar New York as a gaudy nightmare out of Ensor—masks of bored gentility rather than faces, busy-ness and bustle in place of contact and commitment, the horrific yellow of the big cab like a shriek from the curb. Philip Evergood thought of himself as working in the spirit of

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Breughel, part wild imaginer and part chronicler of his age. If he didn't quite attain that height, there were few Americans of his day who even considered the model as applicable.

"California in the 1970s" at the Frumkin/Adams Gallery might have been seen, happily, as an antidote to the earnestness of so much contemporary art (not to mention to the dreariness of this worst of winters in the Northeast). A survey of a lively time in a lively place, it omitted a few people one would have expected to see in that context (e.g., Peter Saul) but included plenty of the big guns: Robert Arneson, Joan Brown, Robert Colescott, Roy De Forest, Nathan Oliveira, Wayne Thiebaud, William Wiley. Three of the most prominent of the twenty-odd works in the exhibition were, appropriately, by the late Joan Brown, whose blend of strong color, slightly offbeat patterns, a jarring sense of space, and sometimes incongruous imagery made her one of the most unpredictable West Coast artists. Her *Self-Portrait with Gorilla* is the last word in droll. Robert Arneson's huge ceramic bust of a chortling George Washington also punctures some pretensions about traditional themes or icons. William Wiley's constructions were rather understated, compared to other of his fabulous contraptions and drawings that have been seen at Frumkin/Adams in the past, but the trademark crazed dogs of Roy De Forest's painting and the gorgeous serpentine form in Nathan Oliveira's oil (set against a tantalizing field of a sort of pink-mauve) made up for Wiley's tameness. Robert Colescott, though, was the real kicker here. This African-American artist is as viciously sarcastic as he's ever been with *Rejected Idea for a Drostes Chocolate Advertisement*, a painting that, against a graceful backdrop of windmills, turns the classic blonde Dutch girl out on the ice with boyfriend Hans into a daughter of Africa. (Lest we forget how implicated those so-civilized Dutch were in the early days of the slave trade, the young man finds it impossible to contain his erection as he skates with his very black partner.) In the no-holds-barred spirit of *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* or *Eat Dem Taters*, his version of Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, Colescott mixes an acerbic approach to his political themes, like the marginality of blacks in classic Western image-making, with some pretty deft brushwork.

In a decade when Conceptual art was at its height and the act of putting paint to canvas a suspect deed, in California the faith was kept by the funky, it would seem—and a varied, talented, intrepid group of oddballs they were, thank goodness.

As Kirk Varnedoe's great MoMA exhibition "Vienna 1900" made clear several years back, the ferment of turn-of-the-century Austria produced an intellectual and artistic flowering—Klimt, Kokoschka, Freud, Schönberg, Mahler, Schnitzler, Wittgenstein, the architecture of Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner—that was every bit as momentous as anything that took place in London or Paris. Now a show devoted to

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the short but extraordinary career of Egon Schiele (a career that only lasted, essentially, from 1909 through 1918) is on a three-museum tour in 1994, making stops at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and in Indianapolis and San Diego. A focus on Schiele dramatically reinforces that impression of an age of exorbitant talent and lacerating insight. Yet somehow it seems almost unfair, or inaccurate, to consider Schiele as in any way representative of an era or a particular place. He could just as easily have been a product of Weimar Germany or Spain in the thirties or Latin America at any time. He could be a still-living London neighbor of Francis Bacon or Lucian Freud.

Such are the engines of Modernism's "appreciation propaganda" (Virgil Thomson's term) that Schiele has long been established as a cult figure, and everyone even vaguely interested in art has a passing acquaintance with one or more of his watercolors of vaginally bleeding women or emaciated young men. The beauty of the show in Washington, D.C. was that it made a rethinking of Egon Schiele's place in the history of modern art seem plausible, even timely, and that it wrecked any notions of safety and familiarity. These pictures, whether watercolors or oil paintings, had a wrenching gut-level impact. They haven't been dulled by time or overexposure. In the day of Mapplethorpe, AIDS, and more awareness of sex-as-violence, they look prescient, less exotic and more "mainstream." Yet they haven't been turned exclusively into precious art objects, a danger that, say, Kathe Kollwitz's work faces. We feel that Schiele has remained the same while we have changed; we are ready to look at ourselves in a different light rather than simply labeling the artist as a loner, an eccentric, just another colorful lost soul.

The biographical facts, of which I wasn't particularly aware before this exhibition and my reading of Jane Kallir's catalogue, make the barbarity of Schiele's style and imagery seem grounded in unpleasant truth rather than twisted fantasy. The son of a provincial middle-class man who suffered from untreated syphilis before his marriage, Schiele had cause to be obsessed with the dark side of passion—his mother was unknowingly infected by her husband on their honeymoon. The illness had killed an older sister by the time Schiele was three; the father, deteriorating into madness, died when Schiele was fourteen. Between his painful family situation and the holocaust of World War I, which began when he was twenty-four, there never was a time when Schiele didn't have to confront death as a powerful inevitability. A precocious talent and a brilliant student of Gustave Klimt, he ran afoul of the bourgeois values of the small town he was living in in 1912 when he was jailed for a month on charges of "public immorality." His drawings were viewed as pornography, he was living in sin with his working-class mistress, and he had exposed a local child (as a model) to his household of "depravity." His weeks in jail apparently affected him more deeply than his three years in the

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military. In a cruel irony, Schiele died at the age of twenty-eight during the 1918 influenza epidemic just as he appeared to be settling down to a less bohemian existence, having left his mistress, Wally Neuzil, to marry a more conventional woman. Edith Schiele, six months pregnant, had died from the flu a few weeks earlier.

Though the Washington exhibition contained a number of excellent paintings that made the point that not all of Egon Schiele's art was preoccupied with extreme states, like the suave profile portrait *Hans Massmann* or *The Family (Squatting Couple)*, this is at heart a body of work that can't accept the world as it is, or rather as it pretends to be. A fear of decay, a fascination with decay, the uncontainable power of spread legs and stripped bodies, the sad proximity of the sexual drive to the urge to hurt and be hurt: these concerns are given a visual form that has some connection to the work of Klimt and Kokoschka or to the exuberant nineteenth-century pornography of Felicien Rops (whose work Schiele knew), but really looks like nothing else that has come before or after. Only someone angry and uninhibited, only someone who believed that his nightmare was really the world's and not a private neurosis, could have produced these harrowing, bizarrely attractive paintings and watercolors. In *Nude Girl with Crossed Arms*, the figure (actually Schiele's teenage sister Gertrude) has a slender totem-like form, her arms shielding her breasts, with the washes of fleshy orange and yellow becoming more reddish toward the face. Is this blood or an enveloping blush of shame? Either way, she becomes an embodiment of vulnerability, cowed by her own urges and those she provokes in others. *Seated Couple*, a gouache drawing of Schiele himself and wife Edith, has the male unclothed from the waist down with his legs apart while the female grasps him from behind: the contortions, the exposure, and the drives are mutual here. The decorative sensuality of Klimt's *The Kiss* is nowhere to be found. Living in a void, usually with no reassuring scenery behind them on the paper or the canvas, the subjects of these portraits from the 1910s are like Giacometti's elongated figures from the 1950s—existentially marooned, animated by the intensity of a dreadful, lonely condition. Everyone looks starved or electric-shocked or recently tortured, terribly aware of their status as objects of pitiless scrutiny. This is an unsavory proposition Schiele confronts us with, no less difficult than Giacometti's, and it is his great achievement that we want to keep looking, haunted by his line and color, even when we would like to deny his pessimism. Viewing one or two examples in a wider context, as in "Vienna 1900," that denial becomes possible: oh, wasn't he talented, but so strange? Seen *en masse*, as in Washington, Egon Schiele begins to look like the unrelenting seer he believed himself to be.

On second thought: another word about Christian Køpke. At the end of the first paragraph of this chronicle, he appears in a doleful list

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of names tied to my complaints about misguided policies and strange tastes in the art world today. And while I will stick to the view that "The Golden Age of Danish Painting" was one of the dullest and least crucial exhibitions I have ever seen at the Metropolitan Museum, and that even Købke, the curators' principal "big name," turns out to be small potatoes indeed when seen in quantity, there is one painting of his that was worth a look. It's worth repeated viewings, in fact. *Portrait of the Artist's Brother* is one of the most elegantly and honestly painted portraits of its decade, a great age of portraiture (the 1830s), with each patch of cloth or inch of the young man's face having something about it to hold one's attention. The good news is, this painting isn't on loan from Denmark—no, we didn't need this exhibition in order to see it—but is owned by the Met itself. A 1990 acquisition, it was hung in the new nineteenth-century rooms last fall as a teaser for the upcoming Danish show and, we can fervently hope, will soon be back there where it admirably holds its own with the realism of Ingres, Corot, and Millet.

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JAMES W. TUTTLETON

Jack London in His Short Stories

In 1897 Jack London went with the great swarm up to the Klondike and tried to make his fortune by panning for gold. Scurvy sent him back to California the following year, his health a wreck and his pockets empty of gold dust. But if, like Mark Twain, he did not strike it rich, London did discover there a new kind of material for fiction—the hard-living and hard-dying woodsmen and gold miners of the Far North. In the Yukon, London also got his "perspective" on life. This perspective is tersely dramatized in "The White Silence," a tale in *The Son of the Wolf* (1900)—the first volume of what came to be his ongoing "Northland Saga." Snowbound in the frozen waste, the Malamute Kid battles to whip into submission his starving dogs, who have gone out of control and broken into the scant food supply.

> The dogs had broken the iron rule of their masters and were rushing the grub. He joined the issue with his rifle reversed, and the hoary game of natural selection was played out with all the ruthlessness of his primeval environment. Rifle and axe went up and down, hit or missed with monotonous regularity; lithe bodies flashed, with wild eyes and dripping fangs; and man and beast fought for supremacy to the bitterest conclusion.

In London's Klondike, the game of Natural Selection meant the survival of the fittest. It was a world of inhuman cold, of blinding snow, and of sudden blizzards that obscure the trail and portend a death by freezing. His gnarled prospectors, Innuit guides, grizzled deputies, and strong half-breed women have exceptional courage, heroic spirit, primitive grit, and primordial passions. Only the strong and cunning survive—with luck. In the end there were the wolves that encircled the campfire, patiently waiting to feast. London's view of the pitilessness of nature in the frozen North is also projected in some seventy-seven other stories published in collections like *The God of His Fathers and Other Stories* (1901), *Children of the Frost* (1902), and *The Faith of Men and Other Stories* (1904). Especially memorable are "The Devil's Dice Box," "The White Silence," "To the Man on the Trail," "To Build a Fire," and "An Odyssey of the North." A number of stories are expertly done, but the mere range of London's stories is also impressive. Not just the rigors of the Klondike but political venality, boxing, sailing, suicide, industrial labor, the slums, South

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Pacific island life, penal reform, romance, and revolutionary socialism—among other topics—are thematized in London's prolific and imaginative short-story productions.

The tales that I have named, and a good many more beside, may now be conveniently read in a new three-volume edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Jack London*, edited by Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard.[1] These three have already done a great deal for London scholarship—especially in editing the impressive three-volume *Letters of Jack London* (1988). But here they have given us probably every short story Jack London ever wrote—some 197 tales in all. Some, having languished for years in forgotten magazine archives, are here reprinted for the first time. The editors also give us a chronology of London's life, the short-story publication record, and an essay appendix defining their textual methods. Thus, if anyone wants to immerse himself in the short-story art of Jack London or to trace his development as a writer of tales, this is the collection to read.

It is a critical cliché that none of London's stories was as remarkable as the story of his own life. This is the kind of comment intended to divert the reader from the felt defects in the writer's art. Still, London's life certainly *was* the stuff of romance; and he fictionalized his experience with a kind of directness that made him preeminently—with Melville, Twain, Hemingway, Mailer, and Jack Kerouac—a devotee of the cult of experience. Anyone interested in London's life, however, should be aware that the autobiographical *John Barleycorn* (1913) is sometimes as imaginatively inventive as his autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* (1909). Andrew Sinclair's *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (1977) or James Lundquist's *Jack London: Adventures, Ideas, and Fiction* (1987) will prove a much more reliable guide to the life.

Born in San Francisco in 1876, London was apparently the illegitimate son of an astrology professor named William Henry Chaney and Flora Wellman, a socially ambitious but very unhappy spiritualist

[1] THE COMPLETE SHORT STORIES OF JACK LONDON, ed. by *Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III*, and *I. Milo Shepard*. 3 volumes. Stanford University Press. $180.00 for the set.

[2] It must be said at once, however, that this is not an edition prepared according to the most exacting textual standards, those of the Center for Scholarly Editions. Very probably the decision to use, as copy-text, the first printed American book version of each tale simplified the editors' task. And their "silent correction" of London's (or his publisher's) "typos" and "misspellings" shortened an already very long project. But in deciding not to use as copy-text London's carbon-paper typescripts—which appear to be the earliest extant form of the texts—and in sparing us a full list of substantive variants and accidentals emendations, the editors appear to have forfeited the imprimatur or "Seal" of the Center. Whether London's tales are worthy of such meticulous editing is not, I should think, the issue. Time, the publisher's money, and the longevity of editors usually control such decisions. In any case, this is likely to be the best edition of the tales, if not the "definitive" one, for many years to come.

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who made a marriage of convenience with the widower John London, whose name the writer chose as his own. London said in *John Barleycorn* (1913) that, from his ninth year onward, his youth was one of unremitting toil. And so it was. The boy delivered newspapers, swept saloon floors, set up pins in the bowling alley, and picked up any odd job that he could find. For a while he worked eighteen hours a day in a pickle cannery. At age fifteen, with borrowed money, he bought the *Razzle-Dazzle*, and crossed the line to become an oyster pirate on San Francisco Bay. Then, because jail was too great a risk, he crossed back the next year and became a deputy for the California Fish Patrol, and he himself chased oyster pirates.

After a stint in 1893 as an able-bodied seaman aboard the *Sophia Sutherland*, bound for Japan, London went underground as a tramp and sought adventure travelling with the hoboes—an experience he recounted in *The Road* (1907). His aimless drifting in search of adventure led to his arrest for vagrancy in 1894 and a thirty-day jail sentence in upstate New York. He was later to say, quite implausibly, that "I have often thought that to this training of my tramp days is due much of my success as a short-story writer." This was the case, he said, because "in order to get the food whereby I lived, I was compelled to tell tales that rang true. At the back door, out of inexorable necessity, is developed the convincingness and sincerity laid down by all authorities on the art of the short-story." London also went on to claim that the hobo life transformed him into a Socialist and impressed him with the need for more education. In 1895 he returned to Oakland, took some high-school classes, and went to the University of California for a term, but then fell for the lure of easy gold in the Klondike.

After the great success of his early Yukon tales, London went off to England in order to conduct an examination of poverty in the London slums. The publication in the same year (1903) of *The People of the Abyss* (his journalistic exposé of English economic conditions) and *The Call of the Wild* (a Klondike tale of a dog's regression to lupine savagery) points to a never-resolved contradiction in London's mind. This contradiction involved London's belief in the Darwinian-Nietzschean view of life as a struggle for survival in which only the blond beast or the *Übermensch* survives, on the one hand, and his belief in Socialist cooperation and collectivization, on the other. The fictional works that express the Nietzschean view include *The Sea Wolf* (1904), a tale of a brutal sea captain, Wolf Larsen, who delights in torturing his crew; *The Game* (1905), in which the fistfight in the boxing ring is London's metaphor for life; *Before Adam* (1907), in which savage prehistoric hominids bludgeon each other with clubs; and of course the many Klondike tales in *The Complete Short Stories of Jack London*.

The works that purvey a Marxian view of existence include *The People of the Abyss, War of the Classes* (1905), *The Human Drift* (1917),

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and tales like "The Apostate," "Goliah," "The Slot," and "The Dream of Debs." These detail the horrors of urban industrialism, the avarice of capitalists, the simple virtues of the proletariat, and the economic rivalry between political empires that made the workers' lives a horror. In "The Apostate," mere manual labor is said to transmogrify a quite healthy young man into a "travesty of the human . . . twisted and stunted and a nameless piece of life that shambled like a sickly ape, arms loose-hanging, stoop shouldered, narrow-chested, grotesque and terrible." London found English workers likewise stunted, physically and spiritually, by capitalist exploitation, while the East End was a place

> where the rich and powerful do not dwell, and the traveller cometh not, and where two million workers swarm, procreate, and die. . . . The chief trouble with these poor folk is that they do not know how to commit suicide, and usually have to make two or three attempts before they succeed.

With touching simplicity London offered the American people an either/or choice: either continued "capitalization of labor and the enslavement of the whole population" or "Socialism." Luckily for us, American readers paid no attention to his political ideas, even while they consumed his fiction with ravenous gusto. Despite his beating the drum for Socialism, between 1900 and 1915 London was perhaps the most popular writer in America.

In accounting for the ideological split between Darwinism and Socialism in London's stories, one must observe that London was in fact an autodidact who had worked up, on his own, Malthus, Ricardo, Mill, Kropotkin, Henry George, Marx, and Engels. Even so, he knew little enough about how entrepreneurs formed capital, manufactured products, or managed a business. Very simply he had been traumatized by his early years of manual labor; he detested it; and he never got over the fact that his first *Atlantic Monthly* short story, "An Odyssey of the North," paid him the equivalent salary of four months of labor. Thereafter, he vowed "to become a vendor of brains" and he wrote to make a living, although he achieved much more than that. Lecturing on Socialism at various colleges, London claimed that "It is no longer a question of whether or not there is a class struggle. The question now is what will be the outcome of the class struggle." London welcomed Upton Sinclair's forgotten novel *The Jungle* (1905) as "the book we have been waiting for these many years. The *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of Wage Slavery." And the horrors of *not* going the route of Socialist revolution London himself projected in *The Iron Heel* (1907). This novel, like "Goliah," portrays the collapse of capitalism from the weight of its own iniquities, the apocalypse of civil war, and the rise of a fascist tyranny—all of which is finally superseded by the golden age of equalitarianism and collectivism. For nearly forty years American

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Socialists held the novel out to us as proof that fascism had an American face; and it was going to happen here if we didn't collectivize. But in fact *The Iron Heel* was a false alarm.

These two viewpoints—the Darwinian-Nietzschean and the Marxian Socialist—are almost entirely contradictory, and they indicate how thoroughly self-divided Jack London really was. He seems in one group of stories to be a pessimistic naturalist glorifying force, brutality, the superman who survives all opposition, and the individualist who triumphs over nature and his social inferiors; and in the next he seems to be glorifying cooperation and the unity of the masses as an antidote to "rapacious individualism" in politics, business, and the like. In an essay called "The Class Struggle" (1903), London argued that laborers should reject the idea of the survival of the fittest and refuse to be the "glad perishers so glowingly described by Nietzsche"; and in "Wanted: A New Law of Development" (1902), he claimed that "all the social forces are driving man on to a time when the old selective law will be annulled." Annulled? Who could annul Darwin's law of natural selection? London nevertheless clearly felt, like Herbert Spencer, that a Socialist polity could cancel out individualism and that cooperation would set at naught the law of competition.

London's Socialist fiction—like that of William Dean Howells, Edward Bellamy, and Upton Sinclair, was largely propaganda. His fiction was in fact most compelling when it tapped London's own blood consciousness, expressed his sense of the primordial, and dramatized the struggle for survival in nature. His enduring theme, for most readers, was the strength, cunning, and intelligence it takes to come through and succeed in the ordeal of existence. And when he let himself go, imaginatively, in the creation of stories like "To Build a Fire," "Love of Life," and "Odyssey of the North," he could be remarkably compelling—so compelling, in fact, that he complained in his letters that his indictment of individualism in the Socialist fiction was not being grasped by his readers. But the glorification of primitive individual strength is not only there in the work. At times London even devolves into sadism—as is apparent in the mere titles of many of his works—*White Fang* (1906), *The Iron Heel* (1907), *The Strength of the Strong* (1911), and *The Abysmal Brute* (1913).

Darwin had proposed that, while no *telos* is evident in the operation of Natural Selection, life evolves from simplicity to complexity and from savagery to civilization. And taking a rosy view of the evidence Herbert Spencer deduced in *First Principles* that "Evolution can end only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and most complete happiness." But London came to see that, if no purpose for life can be found, the process might just as easily reverse itself and lead to atavism and a human regression to bestiality. This is the meaning of stories like "Love of Life" and *The Call of the Wild*, where one's own primordial wildness lures one back from domesticity and civilization

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into a feral nature red in tooth and claw. In *White Fang*, London even emptied evolution of all meaning and the world was seen

> as a place wherein ranged a multitude of appetites, pursuing and being pursued, hunting and being hunted, eating and being eaten, all in blindness and confusion, with violence and disorder, a chaos of gluttony and slaughter, ruled over by chance, merciless, planless, endless. . . . The aim of life was meat. Life itself was meat. Life lived on life.

This is, of course, an animal view of existence, but London was drawn to it. "Competition was the secret of Creation," a character says in *A Daughter of the Snows* (1902). "Battle was the law and way of progress." This, London came to feel, was true even in social development. The Anglo-Saxon conquest and empire was, for him, a reflection of the Nietzschean strength of the white race. An unembarrassed racist, he dismissed Mexicans, blacks, Melanesians, and half-breeds as retrograde groups in the evolutionary ascent of the races. To Cloudesley Johns he wrote that "I do not believe in the universal brotherhood of man." He said that Socialism was devised "to give more strength to those certain kindred favored races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser weaker races. The very men who advocate socialism may tell you of the brotherhood of all man, and I know they are sincere but that does not alter the law." London had a fantasy that he himself was the blond beast, took to calling himself Wolf (and Charmian, his wife, the "Mate-Woman").

London frankly did not attain the highest level of the short-story art—the level of Hawthorne, James, Chekhov, Joyce, and Hemingway. The journalist-writer who published forty-four volumes in sixteen years—another six appeared posthumously—was, frankly, batting it out most of the time. He wrote so much that he depleted his imagination and had to pay Sinclair Lewis and others for short story ideas. And, much of the time, so far as the stories went, he was potboiling—what Lewis has memorably described as "turning out a swell piece of cheese to grab off some easy gravy." Still, tales like "The Chinago," "A Piece of Steak," and "The Red One" have a kind of energy and vitality, and a voice and an atmosphere, that made it natural for his contemporaries to compare him with Bret Harte and Rudyard Kipling. "Hunks of raw life" cut from the still living body of experience London aspired to give us, filtered withal through Herbert Spencer's *Philosophy of Style*. If the invention of plots was not London's forte, he did succeed with point of view technique, landscape description, the realization of setting and atmosphere, and the creation of primitive but at times richly complex characters. His code hero, the Malamute Kid, has a mythic vitality like that of Cooper's Leatherstocking. And truly original and memorable are some of those tough Innuit women like Labiskwee in "The Wonder of Woman" or

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Killisnoo in "Siwash." London called them the "daughters of the wolf who have bred and suckled a race of men," and to them he dedicated *The God of His Fathers* (1901).

Toward the end of his life—he died at forty, perhaps of renal failure, perhaps (in great pain) of a deliberate morphine overdose—Jack London turned away from materialistic monism to the mysticism of Carl Jung and the "collective unconscious." This turn, evident in tales like "The Bones of Kahekili" and "The Water Baby," might have been predicted, since London had a lifelong attraction to the supernatural which his avowed atheism obliged him consciously to repress. Here is a passage from "The White Silence," however, an early tale that represents the visionary London at his contradictory best:

> The afternoon wore on, and with the awe, born of the White Silence, the voiceless travelers bent to their work. Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finity,—the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of the earthquake, the long roll of heaven's artillery,—but the most tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass; the slightest whisper seems sacrilege, and man becomes timid, affrighted at the sound of his own voice. Sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot's life, nothing more. Strange thoughts arise unsummoned, and the mystery of the universe comes over him,—the hope of the Resurrection and the Life, the yearning for immortality, the vain striving of the imprisoned essence,—it is then, if ever, man walks alone with God.

The passage is a *locus classicus* in London's fiction, a masterpiece of atmosphere and evocation. In a recent issue of *The Writer's Digest* it was singled out for tyros as the right way to do it. But if we take a close look at it, the passage is quite remarkable for other reasons. It begins with the blankness of nature, the meaninglessness of human life, and a naturalistic atheism. Man is mere meat, or less—a maggot. But, before we reach the end of the paragraph, a rather Kierkegaardian existential intuition of the reality of the supernatural world has replaced it. London has looked into the heart of light, the silence. Man is no longer mere meat, an animal struggling across the frozen landscape. A spiritual consciousness has been awakened by the eloquent silence of nature, and there is now a perception of the Divine. London's divinity is the *Deus absconditus*, whose presence is registered as an absence in Nature. It was Pascal who said that "*Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie.*" And perhaps no one caught that feeling better than London in his description of the vast blank desolation of the Klondike snows.

Unfortunately, London's imagination did not always work at the

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top of his form, and, even when it did, he could be quite dissatisfied with the result. Although he had always been content to see the short story and the novel as instruments of useful social change, London eventually came to regard writing as totally futile. When he was oppressed by feelings about the futility of art, he could see it as only "a pompous legerdemain, a consummate charlatanry that deceived not only its devotees but its practitioners." London's loss of faith in art probably reflects a loss of faith in himself, and it may help to account for the despair, at the end, that drove him to suicide. Still we have in *The Complete Short Stories of Jack London* twenty or so very nearly perfect tales and a number of others that can still amaze the troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

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GARY KRIST

Bad Art, Good Entertainment

Is there any meaningful distinction to be made between art and entertainment, between literature and popular fiction, between the stuff we read in English 403 and the stuff we read on Delta 304? Many of us would say confidently that there is, and that somehow we know the good stuff when we see it. Dorothy Sayers' *Five Red Herrings*, we would say, is definitely entertainment, no matter how well-crafted; *Crime and Punishment* is definitely art. But what about Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*? At what point does a novel earn the unambiguous distinction of literature? Is there a borderline? If not, why do I feel certain that Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* falls on the pop side of that line, while Jay McInerney's very similar *Brightness Falls* (a wonderful book, as hard as that may be for some critics to accept) lies clearly on the lit side?

Of course, there are lots of people who would say that this whole question is meaningless—that it's a pointless, arrogant, and ultimately boring endeavor to try to make such semantic distinctions. But let's ignore those people. Their attitude strikes me as naive at best and dishonest at worst. Being a thinking person means making such distinctions. We do it all the time in our moral lives—when we decide that we'll eat shrimp but not cows (or cows but not monkeys, or monkeys but not human beings), or when we decide that there's a certain point between fertilized egg and fully-developed baby at which a fetus becomes a human being with all of the accompanying rights to life. Admittedly, the art-entertainment distinction may not be quite in that league as far as its ethical consequences go, but it's the same sort of question, and in the extreme case of art versus pornography (Is Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* a work of literature or a dangerously misogynistic act of pornography deserving suppression?), it can have a comparable weight.

To put to rest any budding prurient interest out there, I should now confess that you'll find no borderline-pornographic books reviewed below (well, one or two may come close), but you *will* find several books that—to me, at least—tread the thin line between literature and pop fiction in an interesting way. What they reveal, I think, is that the criteria for literature may have less to do with grand themes and high-toned intentions than with a certain line-by-line sophistication and grace. And there's at least one book reviewed below that confirms my long-held suspicion that, given a choice, I'd much rather spend my time on good entertainment than bad art.

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Certainly I can think of worse ways of spending time than reading Patrick O'Brian. An Irish novelist now living in the south of France, O'Brian has been dutifully turning out novels of seafaring adventure for decades, with not much of an audience that I've been able to discern—at least not in this country and at least not until recently. But now, it seems, O'Brian has been "discovered." With the hardcover publication of *The Wine-Dark Sea* (along with recent reissues in paperback of several earlier novels), the author, now in his eightieth year, is enjoying a surge in popularity, with each new book respectfully and prominently reviewed in the literary press.[1] The world is learning what some loyal readers have apparently known for a long time, that his series of Aubrey/Maturin novels—which trace the high-seas adventures of an overweight British sea captain (Jack Aubrey) and his friend, an erudite surgeon-*cum*-government-spy (Stephen Maturin) as they negotiate the troubled waters of early nineteenth-century *Realpolitik*—are exceptionally appealing examples of old-style storytelling. In fact, a few critics have grown downright hyperbolic in their praise, comparing O'Brian with the likes of Melville and Conrad.

Well, some reviewers will say anything to get their names on the back of a book. Yes, O'Brian's novels take place on those same 21-sailed crucibles of human behavior that have been the setting for some of our best literature, but the Aubrey/Maturin books, at least if this latest example is characteristic, are potboilers, plain and simple. O'Brian's novel careens from plot device to plot device with the breathless abandon of a Saturday-afternoon serial. It's almost comical, in fact, to watch the author go to such lengths to set up great towers of plot architecture—a bizarre volcanic eruption at sea, a complex but ultimately unsuccessful plot to overthrow the Peruvian government—only to abandon them like so much ballast in order to race on to the next adventure.

Other elements of pop fiction are here as well: O'Brian, like a retro Tom Clancy, takes a certain manly delight in technical intricacies:

> [N]o man laid a finger on a rope until Mr. Grainger called, "Now then, our George, haul away," and the long slim yards fairly shot up through the rigging, up and up, threading lengthways through a cat's-cradle of cordage, up to the masthead, where the light and nimble Abraham Dorkin cut the small stuff stopping the yard to the halliards, swung it on to the horizontal plane of the topgallant yard, fixed it there with a becket, lashed the clews of the sails, its lower corners, to the topgallant yardarm, cast off the beckets, and cried, "Way-oh!"

[1] THE WINE-DARK SEA, by *Patrick O'Brian*. W.W. Norton. $22.00.

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Way-oh indeed. Certainly Melville reveled in this kind of esoterica on occasion, but *Moby Dick*'s extended descriptions of blubber-rendering, for instance, tend to be full of sly metaphorical resonances. They seem motivated by an impulse entirely different from O'Brian's sunnier, more innocent delight in the sheer specificity of seafaring mechanics.

By the same token, however, there are qualities to O'Brian's fiction that *do* push it close to that great, fuzzy art-entertainment meridian. Aubrey and Maturin are unusually well-developed characters—multi-dimensioned, sophisticated, intellectually captivating. And there are many stretches of writing in the book that demonstrate a shrewd insight. In this passage, for instance, Maturin (who, in his youth, was much taken with the ideals of the French Revolution) regrets having sent a somewhat too optimistic letter to his superior in London:

> He wished he had not used such confident, presumptuous words in writing to Blaine. From very early times men had believed that it was unwise, even impious, to tempt fate. . . . The confident system of his youth—universal reform, universal changes, universal happiness and freedom—had ended in something very like universal tyranny and oppression. The ancient generations were not to be despised; and the seamen's firm belief that Friday was unlucky was perhaps less foolish than the philosophe's conviction that all days of the week could be rendered happy by the application of an enlightened system of laws. He wished the main conference had not been set for Friday . . .

This kind of grace-note—an aging man's momentary doubt as he feels the rigid confidence of his youth giving way to a more seasoned open-mindedness—is what occasionally gives O'Brian's fiction a sense of real substance. *The Wine-Dark Sea* may not be *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* but there are times when it delivers that defining experience of literature—the sense of being in the presence of an active, complex, and compassionate intelligence.

Of course, philosophical pretensions alone—whether modest or grand—don't automatically make a book literature, an impression reinforced by my reading of *Machine*, a highbrow thriller from France with aspirations much greater than the book itself can support.[2] Written by René Belletto, the novel purports to raise all kinds of serious questions about identity, love, the mind-body problem, and the arrogance of science. Let's just say that it does not succeed.

The plot itself is a wondrous thing: Marc Lacroix, a brilliant young psychotherapist, has developed (in his basement, naturally) something he calls a "psychocomputer," which can transfer parts of one person's consciousness into another person's mind. Because he is

[2] MACHINE, by *René Belletto*. Trans. by *Lanie Goodman*. Grove Press. $21.00.

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brilliant and young and therefore a renegade, Lacroix keeps his invention a secret, trying it out surreptitiously on an alleged psycho killer he's been treating (one Michel Zyto). But—this will come as a shock to you, I know—the experiment goes awry. The two men end up switching bodies completely, and Zyto takes advantage of this opportunity by assuming the life of his erstwhile psychotherapist, neatly disposing of same (now in Zyto's body) back in the psychiatric ward.

Given all the psycho- prefixes in that last paragraph, you can imagine how furiously the author attempts to give some scientific credibility to these B-movie antics. In the passage below, Zyto, whose psychosis is neatly explained by the fact that his mother sexually abused him as a child, tries to deal with the prospect of feigning affection for Lacroix's wife:

> Hugs, kisses, endearing words, Michel Zyto was flabbergasted that he'd been able to put up with so much from a woman, a woman who had come near him, touched him. Like his mother. But, like his mother, could she possibly desire anything less than his total destruction? Wouldn't she take him inside her, engulf him, swallow him up, reduce him to nothing?

Paging Dr. Freud . . .

But such bargain-basement psychoanalysis isn't even the worst of *Machine*'s sins. Certainly the book is not helped by an inept, cliché-ridden translation (at one point, Zyto waits for Lacroix with "baited breath"—a cliché and a diction error all in the space of two words). But even if we grant Belletto the single, fundamental suspension of disbelief his story demands (that such a transference could occur), the book lacks a more crucial kind of credibility. Why, for instance, has Marc Lacroix, who allegedly has thought for years about this experiment and its possibilities, somehow not realized its most significant (and, to this reader, immediately obvious) consequence—namely, immortality? Even Zyto the psycho comes upon this epiphany eventually, transferring his consciousness into the healthy body of Lacroix's young son. Yet it seems to come as a surprise to our brilliant Dr. Lacroix.

Such failures of imagination undermine a work of fiction far more seriously than would a flying elephant or a flawless hero. They reveal that the world of the novel is not just far-fetched, but poorly imagined; it doesn't even make sense on its own terms. And so *Machine*, despite its pretensions, turns out to be nothing more than the usual best-selling cardboard-and-sawdust contrivance. Wait for the movie.

Short stories, largely because they have so little commercial appeal anyway in these Dark Ages of publishing, tend to fall clearly on the literature side of the great divide. It's only a rare juror who would carry a story collection as the boredom-fighter of choice between *voir dire* examinations, so why would a writer aspiring to entertain a wide audience even bother to produce them? (Things were very different

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in the 1920s, of course, when a story sale to a popular magazine like *Collier's* could keep a writer in cigarettes and champagne for six months.) But there are still some contemporary collections that hug the border—*The Last Good Man* by Dan Lyons, for instance, a winner of the normally less commercial Associated Writing Programs Award for Short Fiction.[3] Lyons is a smoothly professional writer, engaging his readers' sympathies swiftly and effortlessly in story after story. He's also a writer with a turf—specifically, the northern Massachusetts rust belt, as exemplified by the fictional town of Lawton Falls, a prototypical mill town where the mill is forever teetering on the edge of closure and/or takeover by the Japanese. Lyons tries to be scrupulously fair in granting equal time to the major ethnic and socioeconomic groups that make up the population—Irish, Italian, and Latino; poor, middle-class, and rich—and he does a creditable job of it (although blacks seem curiously absent). But psychology rather than sociology is foremost in this author's mind, fortunately, and, when he wants to, he can conjure up personal complexities and telling moral conundrums with an impressive economy.

The trouble is, he doesn't always want to. To my mind, there are just too many slight, slick stories in this collection—too many mild tales of missed connections and romances gone sour. And at least one story—"The Birthday Cake," an O. Henry-esque fragment about a widow who religiously buys a cake for her dead husband every week—probably should have been left in the closet that the poet Horace recommended as the proper place for all art until nine years after its creation (clearly, Horace never had to support a family on his art . . .). What's more, in a few other stories, Lyons misses an opportunity for real significance. "The Greyhound," for instance, is a really wonderful comic story about a pair of young computer nerds (one Irish, one Jewish) who carry out an elaborate dognapping as revenge on the local Italian mob boss. The author's depiction of the loopy marginality of these hacker-types is an achievement in itself (these are characters I've rarely seen written about). But just when, near the end of the story, Lyons seems to open a door to a new level of gravity—when one of the two nerds, drunk on ransom money, looks at himself and discovers a dissatisfaction with the very distance from normal life that he's always cultivated—Lyons seems to pull away. The story ends with a small ironic flourish more clever than satisfying.

There are times, however, when Lyons allows himself to delve more deeply into his characters, and the results can be striking. "New Math," "The Clear Blue," and the title story are all first-rate, opening up at odd moments to reveal unexpected new depths of sorrow or insight. But the best thing in the book is undoubtedly "The First Snow," a story about a teenager whose father, a high-school teacher,

[3] THE LAST GOOD MAN, by *Daniel Lyons*. University of Massachusetts Press. $19.95.

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is arrested one night for cruising men at a highway rest stop. Mom and the other two kids move out, but Robert, for reasons he can't quite fathom, chooses to remain loyal to his father, facing the ridicule of his classmates and neighbors. It's a heartbreaking story, all the more so for its lucid simplicity and economy of language. And where other writers might have glossed over the more difficult questions of the situation—What is the nature of Robert's sense of betrayal? Does he see something of his father's repressed homosexuality in himself, and does that frighten him?—Lyons gamely takes them on. It takes a certain kind of courage to abandon the pose of cool distance that would have excused him from addressing these questions head-on, and in stories like "The First Snow" Lyons demonstrates that he has it.

Speaking of poses and posturing, I also read *Butterfly Stories* this quarter, a book that (despite its title) is a novel—and a novel that certainly no one would confuse with entertainment.[4] The author's name, William Vollmann, may be familiar, since he's been producing books at a feverish rate: eight in just the past few years (and a ninth is on its way even as I write this). He's a writer who appears to take big chances, wrestling with grand brawny subjects in a sometimes baroque, sometimes hallucinatory prose that has inspired all sorts of reviewer hyperbole. But if *Butterfly* is any indication, the chance-taking of Vollmann's work is largely bravado. While his personal life may be full of recklessness (according to his press materials, he spends much of his free time wandering around war zones and getting beaten up by members of the various *demimondes* that seem to intrigue him), *Butterfly Stories* strikes me as—at least on an emotional level—entirely *safe*, mainly because Vollmann refuses to commit to any stance toward his main characters besides contempt. Yes, he pays exaggerated lip service to the writer's prerequisite of compassion, but as far as I can tell he never actually engages in it.

The novel is about prostitutes, though not (or at least not *only*) the kind that we normally associate with the term. In Vollmann's eyes, the world is teeming with prostitutes and consumers of prostitution, buying and selling, degrading and being degraded, faking physical and metaphysical orgasms as they look for a satisfaction they'll never find. The protagonist of the book is an ironic quest-hero known variously and sequentially in the book as the butterfly boy, the boy who wanted to be a journalist, the journalist, the husband, and finally Vanna's husband (with typical coyness, Vollmann never gives us his actual name). But the real center of the book is provided by that literal kind of prostitute so dear to Vollmann's heart—specifically, a series of Thai and Cambodian "taxi girls" with whom the journalist and his photographer-friend cohort while on assignment for an unnamed American publication.

[4] BUTTERFLY STORIES, by *William T. Vollmann.* Grove Press. $21.00.

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One of the most annoying things about this book is Vollmann's consistent disingenuousness. In an oozingly affected *apologia* to the reader at the beginning, Vollmann informs us that, despite whatever simplified, priggish notions we may have of prostitutes:

> . . . there are at least thirteen times as many different sorts of whores as there are members of the Public (and I think you know what I mean by members.) . . . Looking under the trees I spy billions of species . . . How could cruelly unimaginative lepidopterists have pinned you to a common corkboard of classification, when after all the world is so shadily large? I'll not commit that crime!

This is a worthy sentiment, maybe, but in practice the various Asian "butterflies" presented in the book turn out to be as numerous and as indistinguishable from each other as cabbage moths. To some of them Vollmann doesn't even assign a name; to all, however, he assigns the same hackneyed sweet/sour inscrutability. And when the journalist picks out one taxi girl as the embodiment of whatever conjugal ideal he seems to be seeking, we're left wondering why he picked *her* in particular, since Vollmann (his protestations notwithstanding) hasn't bothered to give her any distinguishing characteristics that might help us "cruelly unimaginative lepidopterists" identify even her type and species.

Just as unpleasant as this artificial compassion, however, is the author's unmitigating contempt for his semi-autobiographical main character. Vollmann practically seeps disdain when he describes the journalist's self-deluding attempts to avoid "hurting the feelings" of the women he is using like so many Kleenexes (the photographer, who is merely an unapologetic amoralist, comes in for somewhat less contempt). But Vollmann, keeping his distance at all times, tries to play both sides of the irony-fence, describing his characters at one moment as "those boys of high morals" (implying scorn for the journalist's hypocritical scruples) and at another moment as "those sexist exploiters" (implying scorn for any of us who might be so sanctimonious as to disapprove of the journalist's indiscriminate—and ultimately suicidal—whoring around).

This kind of broadcast derision, of course, is an easy ploy for an author wanting to stake a claim to seriousness without risking any kind of moral stance. But even the elements of self-condemnation in the book strike me as self-protective—just another means of escape from authorial commitment. It's a shame that Vollmann's alleged chance-taking amounts largely to stylistic pyrotechnics and attitude, because he shows flashes of real brilliance at times (some of the writing in the first chapter is breathtaking). He's been declared a potential heir to the throne of writers like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and even, for God's sake, Herman Melville. After reading *Butterfly Stories*, however, I'd recommend that the coronation ceremonies be put on hold. It may be art, but it's certainly not good art.

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But let me end somewhat less depressingly. Yes, there was one book I read this quarter that I can actually recommend without reservation, and while it's a novel with a clear political agenda to advance (something that many people would find incompatible with the whole idea of art), it sacrifices none of the expressive richness of real literature. The book is *The Last Hunt* by Horst Stern, a filmmaker known in his native Germany for his television commentaries on the environment. As you might expect, his book has a distinct polemic edge—its message is conservationist, anti-development, even (how awkward in the 1990s) anti-capitalist—but it's a lovely piece of writing, and full of some very unpolitical crosscurrents of doubt.[5]

The story has a kind of serene simplicity, despite the fact that it's told from three different perspectives—that of an old German executive acting as a World Bank advisor on several development projects; that of the sly local game warden, who leads the banker out on an artfully arranged bear "hunt"; and that of the bear itself, a huge old male unaccustomed to the encroachments of bulldozers and asphalt. Using the bear as a point-of-view character, of course, is a risky decision, but Stern succeeds amazingly well, rendering the animal with none of the coyness that is the obvious danger in such a choice. The bear's part of the story is told with a plain-spoken directness (exceptionally well-translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider) that is somehow unassailable.

The novel follows each of its three protagonists in turn as circumstances gradually bring them together in a densely wooded forest somewhere in an unnamed Eastern European country. The denouement, of course, is never in doubt from the beginning: The bear will be shot, the banker will walk away feeling ashamed and unsatisfied, and the game warden will receive a large, and largely unearned, tip. But this aura of inevitability strikes me as a strength rather than a weakness, because the book is—on one level, at least—a fable. Its moral is about the commodifying of nature, how we cheapen both the natural world and ourselves by dragging all of our encounters down to the level of a commercial transaction.

But *The Last Hunt* is also something more—an elegy about an old man facing, for the first time in his life, the self-deluding rationalizations on which he's built his entire career. The political intent of the book is thus submerged, expressed primarily through the human (not to mention the ursine), allowing the book's overriding sense of waste to ramify in both the personal and the political realms. That Stern can achieve this level of complexity in a novel of such straightforward honesty is an impressive accomplishment—and one that lifts his quiet book far above the more strenuous efforts of these twentieth-century Melvilles the publicists keep telling us about.

[5] THE LAST HUNT, by *Horst Stern*. Trans. by *Deborah Lucas Schneider*. Random House. $18.00.

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SUSAN BALÉE

Unconventional Victorian

WILKIE COLLINS, WHOSE LITERARY REPUTATION LANGUISHED for most of this century, is one dead white male whose works are enjoying a revival. In his day, he ranked foremost among the 1860s "sensation" novelists (his 1859–60 novel, *The Woman in White*, is generally considered the first and best of the genre), but when the fashion faded, so did Wilkie. As a man who always admired and championed "strong-minded" women (during an era when submissive angels-in-the-house were the ideal), Wilkie would be delighted to know that feminists are largely responsible for resuscitating his reputation.

Elaine Showalter, currently the chair of the English Department at Princeton University, probably deserves most of the credit for returning Wilkie to reader consciousness in the mid-1970s. With several well-placed and eminently readable articles, she triggered a new interest in this subversive and enormously popular brand of fiction. Many have followed the trail she blazed, and books now abound about sensation fiction and its spicy ingredients—murder, mystery, mistaken identity, bigamy, insanity; its anti-heroines—Lydia Gwilt, Isabel Vane, Lady Audley; its major practitioners—Collins, Mary Braddon, Ellen Wood, Charles Reade; and its nineteenth-century audience—*everyone*. Sensation novels were the best-selling books of the century and attracted readers from every class.

But of all the sensation novelists, it is Wilkie Collins who most often appeals to critics and readers alike; Wilkie Collins who appears most often in scholarly articles and books; and Wilkie Collins who has been the subject of two excellent biographies in the last five years. The first of these, William M. Clarke's *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, debuted in London in 1988; the second (written concurrently, as it happened), Catherine Peters' *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins*, first appeared there in 1991 and has just been brought out in the U.S. by Princeton University Press.[1] Both Clarke and Peters devote themselves to detailing the "double life" of this most unconventional of Victorians—Wilkie never married but supported two mistresses and their children in separate households—but Peters also takes pains to present a minutely-observed portrait of the novelist's entire life,

[1] THE KING OF INVENTORS: A Life of Wilkie Collins, by *Catherine Peters*. Princeton University Press. $29.95.

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beginning her biography with a well-drawn sketch of Wilkie's parents before the birth of their first son.

William Wilkie Collins, born in January 1824, was the son of William and Harriet Collins. William was a successful painter and a member of the Royal Academy and, through marriage, he rescued Harriet from a governess's wretched lot. Catherine Peters, who is also the author of *Thackeray's Universe* (Oxford), provides a richly-documented account of the early life of Wilkie's mother. Peters examines a memoir of Harriet "until now never identified or discussed by her son's biographers." This is just the first of many occasions on which the reader feels that Ms. Peters has meticulously applied herself to finding every manuscript source that bears on her subject. Fortunately, this makes up for her reliance on what has now become a rather hackneyed thesis about Wilkie Collins: that his fascination with doubles in his fiction, and his creation of an alter ego in his life (he visited one of his mistresses under the pseudonym of "Mr. Dawson"), reveal uncertainty about his own identity.

Ms. Peters marshals all the old evidence to support Wilkie's "identity crisis." First, he was born misshapen: his head was too large for his body and bulged on the right side, his legs were spindly, his eyesight dim, his height below average. Wilkie was always self-conscious about his looks, his biographer tells us, although he dressed flamboyantly in loud checked shirts and ties. (Curiously, Ms. Peters interprets his bohemian dress as a flouting of Victorian sartorial conventions, whereas it more likely signalled defiance of his odd physical appearance.) Named "William" after his father, Wilkie could not throw off the paternal *prénom* until he reached maturity, at which point he restyled himself "Wilkie," his middle name (after his father's painter friend, David Wilkie). Throughout his life, acquaintances tended to address him by the familiar form.

He also could not throw off the paternal profession of painting until he proved himself less apt than his younger brother, Charley. Charles Collins became an important pre-Raphaelite painter—until his neuroses forced him to lay down his brush—while Wilkie broke away from his father's art and began to paint his scenes in words. Nevertheless, he used his knowledge of the painter's trade in several of his novels (Walter Hartright, the hero of *The Woman in White*, is a drawing master), and, despite his jokes to the contrary, he did more than dabble himself. One of his paintings, *The Smuggler's Retreat*, appeared in the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1849.

After presenting Wilkie's struggles to break free of his father's expectations and to accept his "inner beauty" despite his outer deformity, Peters adds another identity-shaping crisis to her argument: Wilkie's parents were intensely religious and "Sunday did cast a blight over the week." Peters develops this theme at some length, and her reiterations of Wilkie's rebellion against his parents' religiosity recall Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* more than the life of Wilkie

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Collins.[2] The crux of Gosse's memoir is in fact an identity crisis he must resolve; his choices are to embrace his father's religion and lose his individuality, or lose his father's love by defying the patriarch's evangelical beliefs. Gosse chooses the latter and forges his own selfhood.

Wilkie's first novel, *Antonina*, does explore religious belief and fanaticism, but nothing in the portrait of his childhood that Peters gives us (culled mostly from William Collins' letters home when he was away on painting expeditions) indicates that his parents were oppressively religious. They seem a familiar type of early Victorian churchgoer: Church of England followers who observed the Sabbath and despised "papists." They weren't humorless fanatics like Gosse's parents; instead, in the letters Peters quotes, they appear as loving people who provided a secure home for their sons and did their best to nurture the boys' talents.

Peters' predicament is all too common in literary criticism; she has hit upon a thesis—"All his life, Wilkie Collins was haunted by a second self"—and feels obliged to support it with whatever evidence she can ferret out. But I have a problem with the "double life/identity crisis" theory as the guiding principle of Wilkie's life. It is true that doubles figure often in his fiction, but they were a hallmark of *all* the sensation novels of the 1860s. Further, the *doppelgänger* is a standard leitmotif throughout nineteenth-century British fiction, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* early in the century, to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Conan Doyle's detective stories toward its close. Probably, the recurring presence of the alter ego in nineteenth-century fiction signals a culture becoming increasingly introspective and psychological, portending the Freudian Age more than it reflects the inner conflicts of particular authors.

Nevertheless, Wilkie Collins' use of the double dovetails well with his "irregular" life—a life that makes him a delectable subject for biographers. For Wilkie was a sybarite of the first water, from his initial taste of Italy as a thirteen-year-old travelling with his parents—he claimed to have become the lover of a much older woman during their sojourn there—until his final days in London, penning half-playful love letters to a little girl he addressed as "darling" and "my dearest little wife." Although he worked hard and with the perfectionism that had distinguished his father's art, Wilkie also played hard. He loved *haute cuisine*—"a man who eats a plain joint is only one remove from a cannibal—or a butcher"—women, Paris, and

[2] Gosse appears elsewhere in the biography as if he's another of Wilkie's "shadow selves." According to Ms. Peters' research, Gosse later lived in the same London house that Wilkie had tenanted for fifteen years. He also attended Wilkie's funeral as the representative from the "Society of Authors." And, like Wilkie, one of Edmund Gosse's books is a life of his father.

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the theatre (as both an actor and a playwright). As one of Dickens' "young men," he accompanied the great novelist on numerous expeditions to brothels in England and abroad, probably contracting (speculates Peters) a venereal disease that exacerbated his tendency to rheumatic gout and hastened the decline of his health.

By his late thirties, Wilkie was addicted to laudanum (a preparation of opium), ultimately working up to a daily dose strong "enough to kill twelve people." Peters hastens to add, however, that Wilkie used laudanum as "a therapeutic drug," not as "an escape from emotional pressures nor an aid to inspiration." Nevertheless, at times he longed to free himself from dependence on the narcotic, and his last novels—so inferior to his earlier masterpieces, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*—must have suffered from his continuous infusions of such a potent drug.

But if Wilkie was a hedonist, he was also a good friend to everyone who knew him, beloved by children, and a responsible family man. He met Caroline Graves in the mid-1850s, when she was a widow with a young daughter and the manager of a London junk shop. Peters thinks "Wilkie may have rescued Caroline from another man, or from poverty and illness." At any rate, he soon made her his mistress and supported her and her young daughter (who became deeply devoted to him) for the rest of his life, except for one significant break. Caroline, unable to convince Wilkie to marry her and make her respectable, briefly left him to wed another man. The marriage did not work out and, when she returned within two years, Wilkie equably took her back. During her absence, however, he had solidified his relationship with another poor woman, a former servant named Martha Rudd, who then bore him three children. He referred to them as "his little morganatic family," and generously supported Rudd in her own establishment. As Peters says, he had "set his face against the institution of marriage"; but when he died, he divided his estate equally between Caroline and her daughter and Martha and their three children.

Wilkie's life was certainly irregular by Victorian standards, but it was by no means uniquely so. His "secret life" only seems shocking in light of Victorian *public* morality. But Victorians have been more adept than squid at concealing themselves in a cloud of ink. For decades into this century, we believed everything they said about themselves, and a stereotype has persisted of them as inhibited prudes. Of course they were not; they simply did not merge their private lives with their public ones—as we do in late-twentieth-century, exhibitionist America. So while their public rhetoric trumpeted the sanctity of the Victorian home and family, their private activities often subverted that ideal. Wilkie Collins stands out because, unlike other eminent Victorians, he was not a hypocrite about his private life. He had to play "Mr. Dawson" when he settled Martha in lodgings near the ones he shared with Caroline, but only because she

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might have been evicted otherwise. But with his friends, Wilkie was open and unapologetic about his liaisons.

For this reason, Charles Dickens found him an admirable companion; Wilkie's "openness about sexual behavior gradually helped to free Dickens from the prison of his status as a Victorian household icon, to an extent which Wilkie himself can hardly have anticipated." Their relationship, as Peters fills it in, generates one of the most interesting parts of this biography—aptly titled "The Sorcerer and the Apprentice." If Wilkie really felt haunted by a second self, that self must have been Charles Dickens.

Their relationship was a complicated one, and it began with Wilkie's early hero-worship of Dickens. Charles Dickens never endured equals, which might explain the problems he had with William Thackeray, and the relative ease of his friendships with younger men. As Peters tartly observes, "Dickens was a stimulating and amusing companion as long as he was in charge." In 1853, Dickens, Wilkie, and the painter Augustus Egg travelled together through Switzerland and Italy and "Dickens' letters are full of complaints of Egg's and Wilkie's appearance and personal habits." Wilkie's letters, on the other hand, express nothing but affection for his companions. Dickens, though he clearly felt himself superior to Wilkie, nevertheless appreciated him as a capable writer; he hired him as a regular contributor to his famous magazine, *Household Words*. And as his marriage to Catherine Hogarth faltered, he began to find Wilkie's carefree companionship indispensable.

Wilkie affably responded to Dickens' need for a non-judgmental and amusing comrade, even though he had begun to resent the widespread notion that he was merely the master's apprentice. Writing to his mother about *The Dead Secret*, a novel he was composing during a trip to Paris with Dickens, he notes that Dickens couldn't guess the "secret" of the book and had prophesied that it would be a great financial success. He adds, "Keep this a profound secret from everybody . . . because people would be sure to say all the good things in it come from Dickens."

As their relationship continued, however, Dickens' sincere affection for Wilkie grew, and Wilkie provided the support Dickens needed when he left Catherine and established Ellen Ternan as his mistress. But when Wilkie's younger brother, Charley, married Dickens' younger daughter, Kate, their friendship finally stalled. Charley, who became an increasingly neurotic and ill man, could neither work nor make decisions. Dickens supported but resented him. As for Wilkie, "his protective loyalty to Charley would have taken precedence even over his friendship with Dickens." Dickens' last letter to Wilkie suggests that the estrangement was more on Wilkie's part than his own: "I don't come to see you because I don't want to bother you. Perhaps you may be glad to see me by-and-bye. Who knows? Affectionately always."

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When Dickens died in 1870, Wilkie attended the funeral but spoke coolly of his once cherished mentor. Nevertheless, he had lost both "a candid friend and rigorous critic."

> After his death the sorcerer's spells finally lost their power; the richness of the imaginative web he threw over the lives of those who knew him faded. The light of common day and the lurid glow of nightmare became separate and distinct phenomena in Wilkie's novels, half-heartedly linked by mechanical narrative devices.

Dickens had died at the height of his powers as a novelist; Wilkie was to live on to see his own powers wane, and his once innovative style of fiction grow obsolete.

Wilkie's final years were poignant; surrounded by his two loving families, he wrote novels that were unique for their outcast—physically and/or mentally handicapped—characters. But the Sensational Sixties were long past, and in the 1880s, naturalism dominated fiction. Wilkie had difficulties selling his books, and made much less from them, though he worked without respite in order to support his two households. Ultimately, his health could not keep up with his spirit and he died of a stroke complicated by bronchitis in September 1889.[3]

Unlike many biographers, Catherine Peters does not weary of her subject as she gets to know him better. She shows his crotchets and his quirks, but they only add interesting detail to a man impossible to dislike, and easy to love. Despite his physical oddities, Wilkie never lacked either lovers or friends. He has found another in Ms. Peters, as well as a critic who requites him well. Her analyses of his books are excellent and may well inspire new interest in some of the neglected novels, such as *Hide and Seek* and *Heart and Science*, even as they enhance our understanding of Wilkie Collins' better-known fictions: *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone*, *No Name*, and *Armadale*. As a researcher, Ms. Peters is peerless; she has left no document unstudied, and she has uncovered a secret or two of her own.

[3] Wise readers won't close this book on the last page of the biography itself, but will read Ms. Peters' excellent appendices, especially "Appendix B: Wilkie Collins' Travelling Desk." In a wonderful twist on a type of Victorian story, Ms. Peters reveals the history of one of Wilkie's heirs through the history of an important piece of his furniture.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Poetry Preserves

Garbage is the in-your-face title of A. R. Ammons's book-length poem,[1] his twenty-second volume of verse and his first in six years. The poem opens with an allusion to the MacArthur grant with its plan to give him time off from teaching to write "that great poem / the world's waiting for." Even the blurb proclaims him as "one of America's greatest living poets." Ammons is not buying such hype as the title and content make clear. The true poem at the end of our century is garbage because "garbage is spiritual, believable enough / to get our attention, getting in the way, piling up." If garbage is not the best poem of our time, it can be the worst, he ruminates, for it embodies the sacrifices and free offerings to our god Mammon: "where but in the very asshole of comedown is / redemption." Ammons owes much to Dante's *Inferno* where lost souls swim in swill, blow around like trash, and find the center of the earth is Satan's rear end. By choosing to write about garbage and to reduce everything to trash, the poet strives for a true perspective. At the age of retirement, well able to live on Social Security and soybeans, he can cast a cold eye on himself and contemporary society. He would just as soon shut up, but he loves writing poetry and letting readers in on his private reflections and reactions. It's the act of writing, and teaching it too, that matters most to Ammons because it makes him more alive to the world around him. He admits: "I have never, / frankly, grown up." For him, "the far ahead lingering far behind" means the present experience of the whole of living counts most: "I don't / care whether anybody believes me or not." Finding a reader to converse with is all he wants. Poetry preserves meaning, living and death by probing in the piles of toxic waste. Nature's tooth and claw lurks in the neighbor's tabby cat that kills a chipmunk in the author's backyard. If there is a god, he/she/it is in the energy of things, immanent and perhaps transcendent. The poet's philosophy is "to be alive is to be alive," not accumulating money, acquiring fame, or making many friends. Happiness is found at a town festival and being one of the crowd, seeing children enjoying themselves and people greeting one another. Ammons even has rules to live by: don't complain, count your blessings, take action, and move on. For him, to act is to write. Ammons describes the origins of a poem, its blank coming on, its first

[1] GARBAGE, by *A. R. Ammons*. W. W. Norton. $17.95.

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impression, and its taking hold. His eighteen-part opus is discursive and intense, rambling and ordered, funny and serious. It's all trash and treasure, trivial and essential, public and personal. In spite of what he claims, Ammons is a true transcendentalist: "to pay attention is to behold the / wonder, and the rights, of things," even garbage. A thoughtful book, it makes a good read and a great deal of sense.

Civitatula, Venerable Bede's name for the "little city" of Cambridge, is the title of John Holloway's long poem in six parts[2] that surveys the story of Cambridge and its surroundings from prehistoric times to the present day. The university's development, its teachers and graduates, form the core of the plot, with special emphasis on poets like Spenser, musicians like Handel, and scientists like Newton. Holloway, himself a retired professor, cherishes the history and geography of his hometown; he tells us: "what I like best is what I write about / and where I write it out as well." His epic is a work of love, with the city its central hero, its landscape, people and events, "then as now," the source of inspiration and affection. Naming places is a chief delight and strength of the poem: "They spoke: fen, / forest and open / field became names and places." And what names! Dowsing, Outer Dudgeon, Docking, Burnham Flats, Harston, Thriplow, Stretham, and Chettisham, to cite places from just a page or two. Out of wind, clay, chalk and rock, by natural cycles, Cambridge came to be through the millennia. As the story develops, the style changes from blank verse, quatrains, ballads, rhyme royal, and back to blank verse. Echoes of G. M. Hopkins' fondness for Old English words and a debt to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* consciously knit the texture of the poem's colorful and vibrant language. The chivalric-pastoral form of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is transposed to describe the cruel executions and terrors of the Elizabethan period. The crippled and blind are banished from town and heretics burned at the stake. Thomas Stanley may be the original Blatant Beast, a thief turned torturer who in the end is himself hanged. Lovely madrigal interludes counterpoint the terrors, echoing the choirboys of King's Chapel: "to fill the world with music; / voices and parts / changing, reposing." The Reformation brings on Milton who is invoked by a sonnet in his own manner, "Milton, lamenting Time the subtle thief." The modern scene with its pollution and "deformed new things" provides a final instance of the desolation of history, the dark side of the story. The poem ends with the hope that we will preserve "Our predatory Eden, such as it is. / Think of its name. Yes. Spare it a thought." Read this poem: you will learn to celebrate a place and time.

Laurence Lieberman offers a selection of six previous poetry

[2] CIVITATULA: The Little City, by *John Holloway*. Cambridgeshire Libraries Publications. £4.95p.

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volumes and eight new poems in his new book.[3] Of the recent poems, three tell the story of Tartine, a Montserrat native whose father sent her to England where she drove a bus, worked as an Underground guide, and sold outsized ready-to-wear from door to door. She also buys a guitar and joins a stray group of street musicians. Back in Montserrat, she sells vegetables and fruit from her well-stocked garden. With her "fulsome girth" and "burly grace," Tartine is larger than life, much like the poetry that describes her. She is just one of the characters who crowd these pages with their wild antics and heady talk. Many poems are set in the West Indies, in landscapes of banana trees and footloose livestock, in urban swamps where the maimed zip by on skateboards and buses careen down narrow streets. "Courtship of the Jersey Lineman," one of the best new poems, has a different setting; it tells the story of lovers, Stan, a lineman who climbs high power-poles, and Monica, a muscular lass who scales rock ledges. They make an unlikely pair: "She chose / the most unscalable shelves, or those which looked impassable / to her lineman, atop his pole / in the distance." They carry on their courtship at these heights until he electrocutes himself with a blown transformer. He recovers, but the shock brings both down to earth, and they marry. Lieberman tells this and other tales in flowing, twisting, leaping lines of verse, mixed with patois and concrete language, with a narrative skip and jump that keeps the reader's eye on the action. Like the kites in "Eros at the World Kite Pageant," the lines are "delicate / glossy papers and silks tied / to featherweight / thin sticks of balsam." Poems take off, dip and dive, demand our attention. Lieberman's travel poems involve his wife, son and two daughters in a series of spiritual and comic adventures, in visits to Japanese temples and Caribbean churches, slums and beaches. Like a slide show, the scenes picture colorful natives as with bubbling commentary our host identifies characters and episodes from his travels. Here are "The Coral Reef," "Flamingos of the Soda Lakes," and "The Tilemaker's Hill Fresco." A crazed quack offers a quick cure in "Sunday: My Throat Afire"; an artist paints a church wall in one week in "The Mural of Wakeful Sleep"; and an ox plunges into a hotel pool in "Swimming Pool Pastoral." Of the early poems, which display less experimental verve, "The Unblinding" is most moving, an honest account of a blind young student who regains his sight and revisits his teacher two years later: "He has grown younger more quickly / than anyone old I have / known." This volume serves as a welcome introduction for those new to Lieberman's verse and a friendly addition to his old fans.

Tom Wayman presents a selection from eleven poetry volumes

[3] NEW AND SELECTED POEMS, 1962–92, by *Laurence Lieberman*. University of Illinois Press. $34.95; $16.95.

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published over the past twenty years, as well as three new poems.[4] Wayman writes with originality and directness about work and everyday life. A Canadian poet, he is at home in the wilds of Vancouver, a truck assembly plant in Windsor-Detroit, or a composition class on campus, "marking time." He possesses a fine ear for colloquial speech and a sharp eye for small absurdities. In "Asphalt Hours, Asphalt Air," he tells us in his introduction, he intended to respond to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with his own view of society. He does do the people in different voices as men punch the clock, women worry about their marriages, and auto workers attend a union protest. The poem ends with a utopian vision of a day when labor and play are one, money no longer drives people's dreams, and workers unite: "we must for our own lives / stand together against the owners of our time." The pun doesn't save the preachy tone that crops up here and elsewhere, echoes of the radical sixties. However, idealism adds a note of sincerity to his serious themes, and Wayman's humor usually stops him from stuffing the pulpit with oratory. He's a wonderful storyteller. "The Big Theft" takes a popular myth of the man who, bit by bit, steals enough parts to assemble a truck in his garage or enough bricks to build a house. "Marshall-Wells Illumination" catches the moment at a hardware store when a customer starts to dance as a disapproving clerk looks on. The narrator is drawn in and chooses to dance. Such epiphanies lift the ordinary into the realm of imagination to preserve them for us. With tact, joy and regret, "Sugar on the Rim" recounts a passionate love affair; "Wayman in Love" finds the speaker in bed with the girl, joined by Marx and Freud discussing the social and emotional implications; and "Routines" offers a witty variation on the old body-soul debate. "Students" summarizes current undergraduate views of education: the Vaccination, Dipstick, Kung Fu, and Easy Listening theories, while among the new poems, "Did I Miss Anything" presents possible responses to students who wonder what they might have missed in class, from "Nothing" to "Everything." "Picketing Supermarkets" is a classic satire on the magic kingdom where consumers shop with no idea of the inequitable system that delivers the goods: "Because all this food is grown in the store / do not take the leaflet." Elegies, on Pablo Neruda, Salvador Allende and others, express the theme of death that weaves through the poems. "Cumberland Graveyard, February 1973" recalls a dead coalminer:

> Lots of the graves are neglected now—not as abandoned
> as the Chinese cemetery half a mile up the road—
> but inscriptions have worn away, headstones tilted

[4] DID I MISS ANYTHING?: Selected Poems 1973–1993, by *Tom Wayman*. Harbour Publishing. $14.95p.

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and cracked, and here a slab of old pebbly concrete
above some graves shakes as you walk on it.

You can trust a poet who writes a sentence like that; follow it to the end and it comes out right. Wayman is a good guide for the twenty years recorded here, through public to personal dissent. From this century he will be well worth following into the next.

In his collected poems from ten previous volumes,[5] John Haines moves out of the landscape of Alaska to the Alaska of the mind, from the world of settlers, animals, mountains and shore to the questing soul of creativity and conviction. It's a formidable journey, carried out with reflection and specificity, with simplicity and eloquence. Haines homesteaded for twenty years in Alaska and still spends part of each year there. *Winter News* (1966) employed the starkly brilliant language of an acute observer of towns and tundra. "Poem of the Forgotten" sums up the poet's experience then:

Well quit of the world,
I framed a house of moss and timber,
called it a home,
and sat in the warm evenings
singing to myself as a man sings
when he knows there is no one to hear.

Poetry is an act of preservation. In fifty years, Haines has seen the land spoiled and exploited, but he returns to it with a preservationist's fervor. "Fairbanks Under the Solstice" opens with a matter-of-fact statement: "Slowly, without sun, the day sinks / toward the close of December. / It is minus sixty degrees." In the silent-as-death town, "ghostly newsboys" deliver the news to the dead. Moose, caribou, bear, lynx, wolf, and fox appear often in the poems. "The Sound of Animals in the Night" announces the presence of "Dark wings that brush the foliage / above us; the crunch of hoofs / in frost." Haines ranges beyond Alaska to the mid and far West, Glacier Park and Montana, to the political issues of the sixties, to family and personal relationships, and to painting and sculpture as a reflection of cultural change. Later poems become more mystical and metaphysical, employing surreal images and abstract motifs. Trained as a visual artist, the poet traces the history of art from the physical power of Michelangelo to the polished steel of David Smith. "The Burghers of Calais," on Rodin's sculpture, reflects: "Now if ever it is winter in the heart," turning inward the imagery of Alaska. In "The Stone Bear," the speaker discovers a stone bear in a graveyard and imagines what it is like to "freeze into living stone." The death theme culminates in

[5] THE OWL IN THE MASK OF THE DREAMER: Collected Poems, by *John Haines*. Graywolf Press. $25.00.

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a dramatic meditation, "Death and the Miser," inspired by a painting by Hieronymous Bosch. Recalling the Roman Catholic ritual of confession, the poem pictures a miser's death as representative of a life of hoarding self-interest, terrible in its lovelessness, "the frost of a thousand / winters of iron." Death is himself a miser, "once he has taken, / he never gives anything back." Other strong poems include: "Winter News," "Horns," "The Stone Harp," "Rain," "In the Museum Garden," "To My Father," "At Slim's River," "Meditation on a Skull Carved in Crystal," "Ancestor of the Hunting Heart," "Age of Bronze," "Night," and the title poem. Haines maintains a balanced hand and eye in all he writes, between truth and doubt, ideal and everyday, generality and detail. He remains a poet of the possible, masterful and modest in language, and yet daring in imagery and high purpose. This generous collection adds another important chapter to the poetry of the last half century.

Robert Pack has published his new and selected later poems from five previous volumes.[6] *Faces in a Single Tree* (1984) picks up on Frost's dramatic monologues with rural New England voices telling tales of broken bonds and of kinship with nature. "Early and Late" features a husband reminiscing over a sexless marriage of fifty years and old romances. Frostian echoes include reflections on our place amid the galaxies: "So what we know is only where they've left from / empty millions of light-years ago." Fathers speak to sons, mothers to daughters, sisters to brothers, suitors to strangers. Ghost stories, marital proposals, dreams and prayers sew a quilt of people's lives in patterns familiar and fascinating. A series of poems about an alter ego named Clayfeld strikes me as less successful; the tone rings too literary a note, creating an artificial distance between author and reader. Another group of poems expand on a quotation of physicist Heinz Pagels. The best here are the most personal: "The Invisible Hand," which describes Pack as a camper snatching up a copperhead and being slapped by a counselor, and "Outlasting You," which takes the form of a moving elegy for Pagels who died in a climbing accident. Poems from *Inheritance* (1992) include further commentaries on a variety of quotations, all with the purpose of digging up the personal and historical past in order to ponder its lessons. Here Pack employs a five-line stanza with fluid skill and pointed conciseness. "The Bear on the Unicycle," for example, concludes an analogy between writing poems and trained bears riding unicycles: "I choose to find direction by / remaining where I am, though not remaining still." Pack wants to don the mantle of Wallace Stevens to ponder the imponderables, but he's more comfortable in the coveralls of Frost planting apple trees. The new poems mark progress in content and style. Childhood in the Bronx, turkeys drunk on nectar, gardening, pruning, and walking in

[6] FATHERING THE MAP: New and Selected Later Poems, by *Robert Pack*. University of Chicago Press. $24.95.

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misty hills preserve moments that stick in the reader's memory. "Mountain Ash without Cedar Waxwings" compares pollution of water and air with the degradation of literature and "our true mother tongue." The title poem contains a poignant account of a father and son sharing a map to follow the course of World War II. These poems are the map Pack leaves his son, "in hope another covenant to save the earth / may find words in the dark."

In his first book of poems,[7] Bruce Bawer clearly maps out the area of his subjects and style. In traditional rhymed verse, he describes his world, from Palo Alto to Manhattan, of homosexual love, religious longing, literary parties, bookstores, household pets, and traveling. Bawer is not ashamed to be sentimental, even self-congratulatory, in describing male bonding; he exclaims about "the sheer bliss" he now enjoys with his new companion. In "Sixty-Fifth Street Poems," the tone sounds deliberately cloying, almost a parody of all the starry-eyed lyrics of boy meets girl. Here boy meets boy: "Love, here we stand at the beginning / of our life together." "Can this / be my life?" he asks, and answers, "I fret even as I weep with wonder." Bawer writes with truth about loneliness, caught in the voice of a friend or in the eyes of a cat he passes up in an animal shelter. The poet won't forget his own past losses in the midst of present joys. Happiness in Manhattan or in any maze of modern streets and throngs of people comes as a gift, and these poems are written in gratitude. In the sonnet "Saxophone," the poet comes upon the store where, long ago, he and his father listened to the owner demonstrate a sax "with a perfect, bell-like tone." Such warm discoveries mingle with painful memories, like the two "Poems for Brian," which recall a bright day at the beach with a twelve-year-old cousin, followed by a view of the same boy two years later, miserable and wild. Split as a youth between two coasts by the separation of his father and mother, Bawer tries to reconcile east and west, past and present, in his poetry. In the family cemetery in South Carolina, he finds "quiet, untouched by distress" ("Mount Hope") and peace in a return to evening prayer ("Devotions"). "Art and Worship" offers a wise and thoughtful summary of the purpose and limitations of what even the highest art can achieve: "our art is to articulate / that which we witness only partially, / finding forms for what we know must be, / yet can't be understood by what we know."

In her tenth book of poems,[8] Patricia Goedicke, like Bawer, takes an aerial view of America, but she is less pleased by what she sees. After watching TV and looking at magazines, she finds: "Each picture I have made of the world bleeds / Into grainy newsprint, shredded pieces of paper" that settle "on the floor of the mind." She writes: "Everywhere, under the bitter garbage of stars / All I want is one clear

[7] COAST TO COAST, by *Bruce Bawer*. Story Line Press. $11.95p.
[8] PAUL BUNYAN'S BEARSKIN, by *Patricia Goedicke*. Milkweed Editions. $11.00p.

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thought that will stay" ("If There Were a Real Voice"). The poet tries to connect with a former friend whom she passes in the supermarket among perishable food and garbage containers, but she is snubbed: "there's no avoiding the rot / waiting for all of us" ("So Long"). Everything goes bad. In "The Emperor's Nightingale," art only reminds us of the emptiness of life. In the midst of horrors, "the corpses pile up everywhere," for the metallic bird is no substitute for the real nightingale that has left us. In a series of poems about dying and dead fathers, Goedicke fashions a myth of lost patriarchy and absent godhead, "as whole civilizations / vanish / into an old man's one / lone outpost" ("Vigil"). "Weight Bearing" describes a visit from an overweight young Indian who embodies the hopeless life on a reservation: "at the center of himself he is starving." Yet he retains his dignity as he "bows to suffering like a gentleman." Goedicke divides her book into seven sections; the strongest are the first and last, "The Goldberg Variations" and "The Lake Itself." When pessimism is supported by observation, the poems work well, but in the middle sections generalities sometimes overwhelm the subject. Too often the first person plural takes over ("Naturally we had to comfort ourselves first") and yields to self-pity ("And in that democracy I had high hopes") ("Heart/Land"). Some poems come straight from writing workshops and smack of smart metaphors ("with black artichoke / spiked hair quivering") and startling similes ("uncles like battered Chevrolets") ("Women's Workshop"). Such style is dazzling but calls too much attention to itself. The title poem represents the right fusion of public and private feeling and thought, presenting a panoramic flight across the country from Washington, D. C., to San Francisco. In the myth, the dead bearskin comes alive as "the live rippling spirit of a bear taking up his bed / and walking, no one can predict how or when or where." The last note is one of hope, hard won and compelling.

In his sixth volume of poetry,[9] Christopher Buckley looks back at his California childhood and sees himself split in two. One side reveals a boy open to nature in stars and flowers; the other shows a youth repressed by religious training in parochial schools. His prototype is his father, a traveling salesman both freed and trapped by work. At forty-five, Buckley has escaped the past by intellectual inquiry, particularly in the field of astronomy, and by emotional growth through love of poetry, but he still searches for clues about his place in the universe. In "our blue and parochial atmosphere," we carry on "our little argument advanced / against all the blind stuff of space, / the dark matter now ninety percent of everything" ("Star Journal"). In the title poem he deduces that ninety percent leaves "ten percent music, a leitmotif / or glossy harmony / spun out against the dread- / naught of silence." Life slipped in, so that "it all hangs with us," he

[9] DARK MATTER, by *Christopher Buckley*. Copper Beech Press. $9.95p.

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reflects as he takes more frequent walks at night. Buckley paints a dark picture of a Catholic childhood: one nun in "the skull and crossbones of her habit" ("Days of Black and White") and another "in her death-black habit" ("Pange Lingua"). The sisters seem inhumanly harsh, not allowing children to gaze out the windows at the sunlight and brainwashing them to sing Latin hymns and march in processions. "Thus we were to forgo the present / mystery of our lives," he mourns, reliving the dark matter of a life that haunts him as he tries to find a new "Pange Lingua" in his poems. In "Tabula Rasa" he recalls a May procession and puzzles now "how, with the fragments given us, / we can, with any certainty, / trace out the lines, the blue- / prints that reveal God's agreement / in it all." When flowers and swallows appear, he admits: "I accept the old metaphors for life / like there's no tomorrow." It's in the physics of black holes that the poet discovers his truest metaphors for our plight: "Everything being relative, / galaxies grow tired before our eyes, weary finally / in their floss and chorus" ("Speculation in Dark Air"). Stare as we may into the sky, "we stand on this side / of the dark, shivering like the grass or like the stars." In the last poem, "Midlife," Buckley plans to travel back to California and take up surfing again; he ends by telling us of a repeated dream, flying over the landscape of his childhood, taking off from the sidewalk and becoming the transcendentalist he has always been at heart: "and there I am, suddenly once more / gliding over that sea cliff and the coast / for as long as I can remember . . ." These poems preserve the dark and light of one man's struggle to find his place under the stars, and they deserve our attention and study for their earnest expression of that quest.

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TESS LEWIS

Sparks of Virgil's Flame

IN AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN TROUBLED TIMES, historians in the early decades of the twentieth century turned repeatedly to the Roman Empire, and in particular to Caesar Augustus' reign in the first century B.C. The two most prominent uses of the Roman analogy as a historical parallel were Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, written during the First World War, and Arnold Toynbee's massive *Study of History*, published in 1939.

In his apocalyptic study, Spengler warned against the phenomenon of "Caesarism"—the emergence in troubled times of a strong man to preside over a deceptively tranquil period—explaining that this political situation masks a breakdown of constitutional forms and inevitably destroys all vestiges of democratic politics. With equal foreboding Toynbee found in the four hundred years leading up to the demise of the Hapsburg Monarchy a mirror image of the Roman Empire from Augustus' rule to its collapse in A.D. 378. Numerous other historians and politicians—Adolf Hitler among the most persuasive—followed suit, using the analogy both as a warning and as a mirror to serve all manner of ends.

Theodore Ziolkowski places this prevalent use of the Roman analogy at the center of *Virgil and the Moderns*, his study of Virgil's literary image among European and American writers and intellectuals active between the wars.[1] Ziolkowski explains that many of the literati in Europe and America were prompted to turn to Virgil's poetry by these widespread historical analogies, by the worldwide celebrations in 1930 of the bimillennium of Virgil's birth, as well as by the crisis in historical consciousness that grew out of World War I's destruction of the accepted belief in progress and historical continuity.

> In an effort to bring meaning into the world of the 1920s and 1930s the Roman poet was invoked, who two thousand years earlier had succeeded in distilling beauty and order from the political and social horror of his own age: civil war, revolution, expropriation, brutal agrarian reform, exile, dictatorship, and imperial aggression.

[1] VIRGIL AND THE MODERNS, by *Theodore Ziolkowski*. Princeton University Press. $35.00.

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As "the archetype of the man of letters in a time of political and social turmoil" and through the consummate artistry of his works, Virgil inspired these writers, scholars, and politicians with hope for the survival of "a set of values and an image of security" that seemed to have been destroyed by World War I. Ziolkowski demonstrates in careful, occasionally pedantic detail how they found in Virgil confirmation for their own political stances or philosophical beliefs. "Virgil's texts . . . became a mirror in which every reader found what he wished: populism or elitism, fascism or democracy, commitment or escapism." The many, widely divergent biographies of Virgil written in the early twentieth century played no small role in influencing the highly subjective reception of his poetic works.

Although Suetonius wrote a detailed account of Virgil's life for the section on poets in his *De viris illustribus* in the second century A.D., the original was lost long ago. For information about Virgil we now depend primarily on a reworking of Suetonius' biography by the fourth century grammarian and teacher of St. Jerome, Aelius Donatus. Outside of a few, verifiable facts, much of Virgil's life is shrouded in legend and hearsay.

Publius Vergilius Maro was born in 70 B.C. in Andes, a small village near Mantua, and died in Brindisi fifty-one years later. According to the most widely accepted version of his life, Virgil was tall and "rustic" looking with a dark complexion. His health was fragile and he often suffered from headaches, sore throat, stomach pains, and nosebleeds. Shy and slow of speech, he had a difficult time evading the many enthusiastic admirers he acquired at an early age, and was often forced to slip into the nearest house in Rome seeking refuge from the crowds that inevitably gathered around him. His father, the owner of a farm and pottery works, was a man of sufficient means to provide his son with the best education available in schools at Cremona, Milan, and Rome, where Virgil studied rhetoric, the standard preparation for a political career. Rhetoric, however, held little appeal for him, and after arguing one case in the courts, Virgil left for Naples to study poetry and philosophy in "the Garden," a school led by Siron the Epicurean. At twenty-seven, Virgil began composing the ten poems that make up the *Eclogues* ("Selections"), also called the *Bucolics* ("Country Poems"), which he published to enormous acclaim three years later. Tacitus relates that the young poet was so popular that on one occasion, when he attended a dramatic reading of the *Eclogues*, the audience rose and saluted him as they would the emperor.

The *Eclogues* contain several autobiographical allusions. In the first eclogue for example, two shepherds, Tityrus and Meliboeus, discuss the forcible redistribution of land given in reward to returning veterans. Tityrus has managed, through the intercession of an acquaintance in Rome, to hold on to his patch of land, barren as it is. Meliboeus, however, must leave with his flocks. In 41 B.C., one year after the battle of Philippi, Virgil's father had been threatened with

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the dispossession of his lands. It is believed that they were restored to him by Octavian at Virgil's request. Virgil's passion for boys, and in particular a young slave named Alexander whom he had allegedly received from his patron, the consul Pollio, surfaces in the second eclogue in which the shepherd Corydon pines in vain for the beautiful "Alexis." Such traceable facts were taken by several biographers as a license for rather unrestrained speculation about Virgil's life.

The idealized shepherds and romanticized view of country life in the *Eclogues* evoked for Virgil's readers a mythical golden age, which he set against the decadent, urbane sophistication of Rome. Yet despite the poems' highly aestheticized subject and structure, Virgil did not forfeit a view of nature as a force that is at best indifferent, and more often brutal.

The historical and political circumstances of the day are more explicitly present throughout Virgil's second volume of poetry. Composed between 36 and 29 B.C. when Augustus' struggle for power was at its most heated, the *Georgics* resound with the rumblings of war. Though commissioned as a poetic treatise on the agricultural arts by Virgil's patron Maecenas, who wanted to revive agriculture and instill in returning soldiers the values traditionally associated with the farming life, the *Georgics* are far from the didactic work they first seem. Virgil gathered most of his information on farming from books and even from mythology, rather than from any practical study. Book IV ends, for example, with the regeneration of a swarm of bees from the carcass of a calf—a mythical apicultural technique in which Virgil himself certainly did not believe.

Under the guise of celebrating man's work with the soil in Book I, Virgil presents instead a view of man's necessary struggle for survival, the harshness of the elements, and the tenuousness of peace. In counterpoint, Book II explains the art of cultivating trees and vines and offers a view of man at rest after his labors, his harvest in and his barns full. Book III returns to the precariousness of existence, the danger of submitting to passions, and the inevitable tragedy they bring. A discussion of animal husbandry ends with an account of a devastating plague visited upon the Austrian Alps by the Furies. In Book IV, bee-keeping becomes the pretext for the presentation of a model society whose citizens work for the good of the whole, and for a meditation on the necessary balance between individual will and duty and the healing power of art.

Composing the *Georgics* (a transposition of the Greek term for the "facts of farming"), Virgil was highly influenced by Hesiod's *Works and Days*, yet he departed radically from his model just as in writing the *Eclogues* he had both relied upon and transformed the pastoral tradition begun by the Greek Sicilian poet Theocritus in the third century B.C. Similarly, in the *Aeneid* he adapted and recreated the Homeric epic. Ingenious quotes from, references to, and variations upon the works of his Greek and Roman precursors dominate all

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three works. This dense texture of literary allusion in Virgil's works softened the shock of his innovations for his contemporaries, yet resulted in a charge by the Victorians of being a verbally gifted but unoriginal poet. (This same technique of literary transposition, refraction, and allusion was later adopted by Eliot, Pound, and other Modernist poets.) With his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, Virgil established a new type of pastoral poetry that had little to do with its ostensible subject—the country and farming life—but was instead concerned, albeit obliquely and metaphorically, with the decadence of the city, the fickleness of literary fame, the brutal nature of politics, and the dangers of passion. In addition, the poetic self-consciousness, irony, implicit political statement, and use of persona in these two volumes would serve as model for poets throughout the ages as different as Milton, Pope, William Barnes, Louis MacNiece, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens.

Virgil spent the last eleven years of his life composing the *Aeneid*. In 19 B.C. he left for what was to be a three-year trip to Greece and Asia in order to visit the places he describes in his epic. But in Athens he met Augustus, under whose patronage he was writing. At the emperor's urging Virgil agreed to accompany him back to Italy, but he fell ill at Megara and died before reaching Rome. His tombstone near his villa in Naples bears the inscription: *"Mantua me genuit; Calabria rapuere; tenet nunc Parthenope; cecini pascua rura duces."* ("Mantua bore me, Calabria took me away, Naples now holds me; I sang of meadows, farms, leaders"—an epitaph adapted by T. S. Eliot for one of the Thames-daughters in *The Waste Land* as "Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew / Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees / supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.")

Virgil is said to have compared his method of composition to a she-bear's licking of her cubs, referring to the belief that bear cubs were formless when born and later licked into shape by their mothers. Virgil dictated his lines to an amanuensis only to rework them relentlessly. It is not surprising then, that on his deathbed he asked his close friend and literary executor, the epic poet Varius, to burn the completed but uncorrected manuscript. Augustus, however, intervened and the work was published in 18 B.C. Many readers choose, in retrospect, to read into Virgil's reluctance to publish his epic second thoughts about his celebration of Augustus and imperialism and the glorification, however ambivalent, of violence in the battle scenes.

Later additions to Virgil's life, many of which originated in the Middle Ages, include the claims that he had not cried at his birth and was such a good-natured infant as to give sign of an unusually happy destiny, that he was highly skilled in the veterinarian arts and even in magic, and that he was blessed with the wisdom of a sage.

More recent accounts of Virgil's life, like the interpretations of his work, are heavily influenced by the biographers' ideological orientations, and Ziolkowski examines several of the more heavily slanted

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biographies. André Bellessort's 1927 study of the life and works becomes a defense of French culture and its "*latinité*" in the face of the barbaric threat from German historians, philosophers, and philologists, most of whom traditionally placed Homer above Virgil. More pointed still is *Présence de Virgile* (1931), the biography by Bellessort's student, Robert Brasillach, who was executed in 1945 as a collaborator. Using a rather novelistic style, Brasillach portrays Virgil much as if he were a young Italian, "part *bohémien* and part protofascist," coming to Rome in 1930. A similar political agenda guides the Italian scholar Paolo Fabbri in *Virgilio: Poeta sociale e politico* (1924), in which he depicts Virgil as the ultimate symbol of the values and glories of Fascist Italy. Diametrically opposed to Brasillach's and Fabbri's political appropriation of Virgil, however, is Theodor Haecker's *Vergil: Vater des Abendlandes (Virgil: Father of the West,* 1931). An active member of the German resistance who suffered repeatedly at the hands of the Nazis, Haecker saw Virgil as an "anima naturaliter christiana," the "loftiest soul of ancient Rome" whose "mythic presentiment of divine salvation history" enabled him to become the spiritual father of "Western Man."

Ziolkowski points out how these biographies both reflected and influenced general tendencies, usually on national lines, in the reading and evaluation of Virgil as a cultural as well as literary influence. While Virgil and his works tended to be used in Italy as justification and propaganda for the Fascists, in America he was overwhelmingly popularized as an archetype for the voyage of discovery. In Latin America he became a source of cultural pride with an implicit political message. In France his reception was marked primarily by an elitist-literary bent, and in Germany by academic sobriety. One of the more obvious cases of influence, however, was the effect of Haecker's biography on T. S. Eliot's view of Virgil.

A long tradition of reading Virgil as a herald of Christianity was begun by the early Church fathers, especially Lactantius and St. Augustine. Virgil's prominence in the canon throughout the Middle Ages is in great part due to the fourth "Messianic" eclogue. Probably written to celebrate the marriage of Octavian to Marc Anthony's sister in 40 B.C., the poem announces the coming of a boy "Whose birth will end the iron race at last and raise / A golden through the world" and will reclaim the Edenic existence that was lost through "the old deceit." Containing also mentions of a Virgin, and of cattle no longer fearing the lion, this prophecy proved irresistible to the Medieval Church. While Eliot did not read millennial intimations into the poem itself, and in fact much preferred the *Georgics* to Virgil's first volume of poems, he was very much taken with Haecker's elevation in Virgil's work of *labor, pietas,* and *fatum* (work, faith, and destiny), three concepts central to the Christian monastic view of life. In Haecker's footsteps, Eliot found in Virgil confirmation of many of his political, religious, and intellectual views, best expressed in his essays "Virgil

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and the Christian World" and "What is a Classic?" Eliot was most deeply influenced by Virgil as a critic, placing the Roman poet in the latter essay "at the centre of European civilization, in a position which no other poet can share or usurp," thus rendering him the primary touchstone for any definition of a classic. Ziolkowski points out that Eliot's poetry, on the other hand, reveals Virgil's "presence in at most a few lines in some half-dozen poems."

The other writers Ziolkowski discusses approached Virgil as a rather more literary model. One of the most deeply influenced was André Gide. Over the course of his career, Gide returned again and again to Virgil and especially to the *Eclogues*. Virgil provided Gide with many titles, epigraphs, and images, and much thematic material. Among his most famous works bearing evidence of Virgil's influence are his 1924 defense of homosexuality entitled *Corydon*, after the shepherd in the second eclogue, and *Paludes* (a latinate word for swamps), a satire of self-indulgent aestheticism and artistic coteries. This novel takes its title from a passage in the first eclogue in which the dispossessed Meliboeus envies Tityrus for being able to remain on his land even though it is covered with stones and swampland. Satisfied with his lot, Tityrus lies underneath his beech trees and plays his flute. Paul Valéry was also much taken with the *Eclogues*, though later in life. Valéry had studied Virgil in school, but did not fall under his spell until he began a translation of the *Eclogues*, an experience that affected his views of poetic language and of the artist's relationship to the state. While loath to condone the artist's collaboration with a tyrannical regime, Valéry does point out that talent inevitably associates itself with a certain aristocracy. Given that the masses in a democracy will not support a poet, he continues, "how could one expect that [Virgil] would not welcome the favors of the tyrant and that he would not extol the one who assures him of tranquil days and thereby restores to him his *raison d'être*?" Jean Giono also came to Virgil relatively late and found in the Roman poet an analogue to his childhood in Provence and his own hopes for a time of order and stability.

Whereas the French writers tended to prefer the *Eclogues*, their English contemporaries more often turned to the *Georgics*. C. Day Lewis' translation, read in the light of the widespread nostalgia for pre-industrial England, directly and indirectly influenced numerous poets. As the Second World War drew near, however, the *Aeneid* gained a new prominence, though usually viewed from an ironical perspective. Cyril Connolly's strange book *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Palinurus* is an obvious example: a modernized Palinurus (Aeneas' pilot who was thrown overboard by the god of sleep), is the center of this collection of quotes and aphorisms, which forms a meditation on civilization and culture. The book's epilogue, "Who was Palinurus?", is a superb satire in the form of a psychiatrist's confidential report.

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While Italian politicians were capitalizing on Italy's Roman heritage and Virgil's place in their cultural history to promote patriotism and other Fascist virtues, Italy's three major poets, Eugenio Montale, Salvatore Quasimodo, and Giuseppe Ungaretti turned to Virgil as a guiding figure of their inner exile. These Hermeticists aspired before the war to a sort of *poésie pure* like that of the French Symbolists. The idealized landscape of Virgil's pastoral poetry and the voyage of discovery in the *Aeneid* provided them with a Promised Land in which they could take refuge from the political dangers that surrounded them. This same imagery of legend also played a significant role for American writers. Whether as the prism through which Willa Cather portrayed her Nebraskan characters and landscapes, as a literary model for Robert Frost's "political pastorals" and rugged rural individualism, or as a theme for the Southern Agrarians in their poetic and prose defenses of the values and way of life of the old South, Virgil provided many American authors with literary resources for affirming or embellishing their own views.

Ziolkowski claims that Virgil's "life and work entered the modern cultural consciousness to such an extent that many major works of the era between the first and second world wars cannot be adequately comprehended without the context of associations provided by the Roman poet." While it is clear that a familiarity with Virgil's poetry does add immeasurably to one's understanding of these major works, the use many of the authors made of Virgil is so highly idiosyncratic that his literary role is inevitably qualified. Hermann Broch's masterpiece, *The Death of Virgil*, is the most obvious case. Ziolkowski discusses at length Broch's lack of knowledge about Virgil when writing his lyrical novel. Broch did not want to write a faithful historical or biographical novel, but intended *The Death of Virgil* to be "a meditation on the meaning and value of art in the face of human existence and death" and on art's role in a declining civilization. In fact, Ziolkowski points out, "Broch knew little and cared less about the historical Virgil, using him merely as a figure upon which to impose his own views and concerns."

There is much to admire in Ziolkowski's comprehensive and detailed study of Virgil in early twentieth-century literature. Yet *Virgil and the Moderns* is in the end more an archaeological dig through that literature in search of Virgilian traces than an inspiring encounter with one of the primary shaping spirits of European and American literature. Although Professor Ziolkowski uncovers many of these traces, and points out numerous affinities between specific twentieth-century writers and the Latin poet, he still does not convincingly demonstrate that the rediscovery of Virgil's work had any overwhelming influence on Modernist literary sensibilities. Too often allowing a passion for detail to dominate his argument, Ziolkowski's evidence at times distracts from his analysis instead of illuminating it.

Theodore Ziolkowski makes great claims for the "significant polit-

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ical implications" of studying the reception of Virgil's work in the early twentieth century. It is important to understand the ways in which the writers and cultural critics he discusses allowed their political hopes and ambitions to color or even skew their interpretations of Virgil's life and work. For only by willfully ignoring crucial elements in the work could they fit him into the various molds they had fashioned. Ziolkowski's analysis of this phenomenon is especially important at a time when new ideologies are attempting to relegate Virgil to the backwaters of history. In this book it is the intellectual blindness of modern writers, rather than Virgil's own presence, that assumes center stage.

What emerges most clearly from *Virgil and the Moderns* is the relevance for us today, with our hopes and disappointments following the revolutions of 1989, of Virgil's clear-eyed view of human nature, political power, and history. His complex depictions of the randomness and fragility of peace, of the capriciousness and cruelty of the powerful, and of passion as an uncontrollable and most often destructive force serve as a tonic counterweight to idealistic dreams of a new world order.

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MARK JARMAN

Memory's Household

IN *THE STRANGER AT THE CROSSROADS*, the second part of James McConkey's trilogy *Court of Memory*, he describes Keflavik, a town in Iceland totally surrounded by a fence. He writes that after visiting friends there, "I thought I could be happy if I could live forever in that fence-enclosed town my friends had come to." For the past thirty years, McConkey has attempted to make time stay still in such fenced-in enclosures. The latest installment of this occasionally puzzling, but more frequently moving project, the third and final part of *Court of Memory*, has just been published.[1] As with the previous two parts of his trilogy, McConkey uses animals and music as constant points of reference. *Stories of My Life with the Other Animals* also continues to deal with the present circumstances of McConkey's life, his family life in particular, as these actually surround those spots of time, those fence-enclosed events that make the past. McConkey returns often to the same events, and anyone who has read the previous parts of the trilogy will know what to expect in the third. But each revisit reveals more, partly as an updating, a where-are-they-or-we-now, but most affectingly as further understanding, as if after so much elapsed time he can tell us things he did not think or dare to in previous versions.

When McConkey began to write his autobiography over thirty years ago it was in the shadow of nuclear annihilation. In "Crossroads" he confesses, "I no longer have the desire, on this immense and silent winter's night, to dissemble, to fabricate tales." Thus he turned to telling stories that featured himself and his family members, his friends and acquaintances, in which he would not have to dissemble or fabricate. But without the fictional drive, that lost desire to make things up out of whole cloth and the fabric of experience, McConkey depends on a handful of key events. They are the divorce and remarriage of his parents, his service in Europe during World War II, his six years as a young college teacher in Morehead, Kentucky, his ascent to the Ivy League at Cornell, the death of his brother in a traffic accident, life with his wife Jean, and sons, Larry, Cris, and Jimmy, and his purchase and renovation of a Greek revival farmhouse and its acreage outside of Ithaca, New York. Possibly the energy of fiction has

[1] STORIES FROM MY LIFE WITH THE OTHER ANIMALS, by *James McConkey*. David R. Godine. $19.95.

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gone into the perseverance of revelation. One reads the first two parts of *Court of Memory*, for example, learning that when McConkey was a pre-teen his father, a restless, unsuccessful entrepreneur, left his wife for a woman in Texas, abandoning his family in Little Rock, Arkansas. But it is not until *Stories from My Life with the Other Animals* that we learn that his mother Grace was thirteen years older than her husband Clayton, that they were married when he was nineteen, and that when Clayton left Grace she thought at first it must be because she had never had a missing front tooth replaced. McConkey points out that when his brother lost teeth in an accident, his mother insisted on having a bridge made for her son; her own lack of vanity was self-denial. McConkey also reveals that shortly after his parents were reconciled, his father again wished to divorce his mother but he, now a grown man, intervened, taking her to the hotel where his father was staying and presenting her to her husband. The process of the trilogy has been something like the unfolding of psychoanalysis.

The parts or chapters are less like stories than essays, less like essays than poems, and finally most like pieces of music, partitas for solo violin. The title chapter of *Stories from My Life with the Other Animals* serves as an example of McConkey's technique. It is in eight sections, each relating some story about an animal or animals in order to arrive at some larger truth, while at the same time showing a fiction writer's care for the details, where God resides. Section I, "Americans in Italy," features a spaghetti-eating cat named Monster who amuses the McConkeys but dies of worms and neglect. On one occasion the youngest McConkey son sees a man kill a rabbit for the family's dinner by driving a pointed stake through its eye. The author is also appalled that the Italians shoot and kill songbirds to eat. Finally he observes that they do not treat animals as comrades and that the value he himself places on animals has to do with his own culture. Section II, "My Bird," deals with a mockingbird, one of a couple, that perches on his study chimney to sing, but his cat Lucifer kills the male and the female mourns for his passing. McConkey's distress over this event makes him wonder if the Italian attitude toward animals isn't preferable to his own. The next section, "Anthropomorphism," returns to one of his central themes, his father's desertion, and he makes this spot of time shine with numinosity. He contrasts the grief his horse Smoky exhibits when his long-time paddock partner dies with his own grief the summer his father deserted his mother. During that summer he developed a deep friendship with a German shepherd named Bruin. He gladly admits that his love of animals is a form of anthropomorphism and that its source was Bruin. Another ongoing story of the trilogy is the attempt of his middle son, Cris, to make a success of a goat farm on the property of McConkey's farmhouse. Section IV, "Goats as a Test of Human Character," shows the storyteller's eye for detail. Frustrated with a newborn kid and exhausted from work, his son throws the baby animal against a wall,

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injuring it. When they arrive at Cornell's clinic for large and small animals, McConkey provides the following scene:

> A mixture of rain and soft snow was falling, making it hard to see. The doors of the clinic were immense enough to permit the entry of the largest truck. Inside, it seemed a gigantic and immaculate barn, brightly illuminated. For some reason, a veterinarian, his white coat stained with blood or manure, was marching a cow back and forth. A blue-jeaned young woman was sleeping on some hay outside a stall; apparently the crisis with her horse was over, for the animal was peacefully munching. From another stall, a bull gazed at us. He was as immobile as the bronze memorial statue of a horse enclosed by a fence I once had seen in a Kentucky pasture.

It turns out that acts of frustration like his son's are not uncommon among animal breeders, and the goat survives without a handicap. The following section, "Spiritual Love," includes another memory of Bruin, the Little Rock German shepherd. He tells the story of how Bruin, after a long absence, recognized him after sniffing his pants: "Excretory odors are the agents of memory in dogs, no doubt for Odysseus' Argus as well as my childhood companion." But remembering that act of recognition touches the wound of knowledge. It is clear that St. Augustine's *Confessions* serve as a model for McConkey's autobiography; the difference is that McConkey has no God to report to, to question and beseech in urgency as St. Augustine does. Still, because he feels "the ebbing of the once insatiable wanting that sometimes makes an unholy—and perhaps uniquely American—trinity of soul, sex, and possessions," he feels compelled to identify qualities that we would otherwise associate with religious feelings, spiritual love, and the soul. About the agèd Bruin, his childhood friend, he writes,

> At sixty-nine, I know that the soul is a name for our unobtainable desires, and that as a child I made of Bruin a repository of a vast wanting that included my absent father but went beyond that to reach the stars—a mighty wish to reach a spiritual truth beyond my limited self, one that could end my isolation by merging me with the natural world and the mysteries of the universe.

Section VI, "Wrath," relates McConkey's confrontation with a poacher who has set traps on his property that have resulted in injuries to two of his dogs and his cat. The poor poacher explains that he cannot afford Havahart traps and tells a story of personal loss that is miserable. Yet this section also includes an episode in which a friendship between a black labrador named Gandy and a three-legged cat, Grabber, comes to an end through no human fault. The penultimate section, "The Road to the Veterinary Hospital," deals with the

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same labrador, this time a victim of a hit-and-run in front of their house. On the road once again to Cornell's animal hospital, McConkey and his wife ride in the back of a truck with the injured animal.

> How strange it was, to be floating through the air like this in a pickup truck driven by a son, to be a white-haired professor kneeling next to an animal that might be dying, while one's wife for forty-five years knelt by the animal's other side, her hair blown back by the wind!

Strange, but romantic, too. While on their way through the night they pass the place where a Columbian couple had run a goat farm until the barn caught fire and they left America, meeting fates full of pathos that mystify their neighbors. The dog does not die but only loses a leg, and the writer and his wife experience the evanescence of life. The final section of the piece tells of building a pond house and swimming with the accompaniment of the three-legged Gandy who "[l]ike the rest of us . . . is as happy as she knows how to be."

The 1982 preface to *Court of Memory* states, "We are what we are." It appears to be the truth that McConkey strives to come to terms with, as St. Augustine strove *not* to be what he was (a vile body), but what God made him to be. McConkey's stoicism is pragmatic, though it lacks St. Augustine's universality. Yet in his renderings of others, when McConkey steps out of the enclosure of his idylls, he achieves something on the order of his master, Chekhov.

One of the motifs running through the trilogy which has a further resolution in *Stories from My Life with the Other Animals* is of a picnic with friends in Morehead, Kentucky, after McConkey had been hired at Cornell and knew that he and his family would be leaving. The friends include a man named P.C., the head of the theater department, and his wife. On the drive home, McConkey takes a country side road on a whim and finds a small church on the bank of a shallow stream which he fords. Inside the church, which is empty, the friends find a piano and P.C. plays while they sing hymns. It is a moment of serenity and fellow feeling. Yet the transcendent experience that McConkey records has to have been affected by the knowledge that he was soon to escape the grind of teaching at Morehead. In an earlier paragraph he captures the drudgery and camaraderie of life teaching English at a small state college where most of one's students are marginally literate. As the friends sang, the liberated McConkey felt, "I was nothing but a voice that merged in melody with other voices."

The final chapter of *Stories of My Life with the Other Animals* is entitled "An Ode for St. Cecilia's Day" and expresses much of McConkey's feeling for music, including the story of singing in the country church. But after recalling that scene, McConkey sticks with the fates of the people there, especially P.C. and his wife. P.C.'s wife Linda suffered from hypertension and died after a series of strokes. A son

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she had given birth to suffered from a defect that stunted his growth. Semi-retired from teaching, McConkey and his wife take a trip to Florida to escape the tension of the Gulf War and visit their old friend P.C. and his son, who themselves long ago departed Kentucky. The two live most of the time in a womblike inner room of their house where the son weaves and the father reads and they watch TV. P.C. tells the McConkeys the story of his wife's strokes and her eventual death. After her first stroke he managed to teach her to speak again by singing to her. When she regained some rudimentary ability to speak, she could do so only if she sang. More strokes robbed her of the capacity to do even this, except to be able to sing her own name, on her deathbed. Now P.C., an elderly man like McConkey, living alone with his handicapped son, must look forward to his son's entrance into puberty, long delayed by his growth defect. The mystery and richness of life and the steadfastness in the face of adversity that McConkey tries often to put on the page achieve an ultimate success in this story.

The greatest puzzle or paradox, since it is not to be resolved by me, is the sense of scale in this book and in the trilogy of which it is a part. The title of the trilogy comes from the tenth book of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, where he states, "All this takes place in the huge court of my memory." There is an epic dimension to the *Confessions* as St. Augustine tries to discover the fit between finite man and infinite God. McConkey also makes claims for the large scale of memory; for example, he writes in "Crossroads,"

> For we grow by accretion—a pile of joy here and a pile of desolation there. The irrational intensity of our feelings in middle age comes from the awful size of the piles, and we're lucky if we can find in our minds some cathedral grand enough to hold them both.

But what McConkey has found is not a cathedral but a house, the Greek revival farmhouse he bought in 1962 where he hoped to live out what he calls "the dream of rural sanctuary." There he has learned, since he does not seek a justification between himself and some infinite being, that "tonight is as far into the future as one's hopes or worries reasonably ought to go."

Stories from My Life with the Other Animals and *Court of Memory* as a whole are moving for their human dimension, their finite size, but puzzling, too, because of an element of restraint that seems to limit their passion and urgency while at the same time speaking in larger terms. "Memory," McConkey believes, "is the human soul." And the human soul in these stories is not epic but domestic, manageable, and fits inside a house.

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DAVID MASON's long poem, "The Country I Remember," has just won the Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award from The Poetry Society of America. It will be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Hudson Review*. . . . NINA BOGIN* lives in eastern France and makes a living as a translator. . . . CAROL HART* is a free-lance advertising writer based in the Philadelphia area. "Growing Up German" is her first national literary publication. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's anthology of modern fiction, *Into the Widening World: International Coming-of-Age Stories*, will be published by Persea Books in October. . . . JAMES W. TUTTLETON is the editor of *Washington Irving: The Critical Reaction* (AMS Press, 1993). . . . GARY KRIST's second collection of short stories, *Bone by Bone*, has recently been published by Harcourt Brace. . . . SUSAN BALÉE's biography of Flannery O'Connor is due out from Chelsea House this July. She is currently working on a study of the mid-Victorian novelist and playwright, Charles Reade. . . . JAMES FINN COTTER, on sabbatical from teaching, is preparing for publication a selection of his poems and a collection of his essays on G. M. Hopkins. . . . TESS LEWIS is a writer and translator living in New York City. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest book is *Iris*, a book-length poem published by Story Line Press. His next collection of poems, *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, is forthcoming from David R. Godine.

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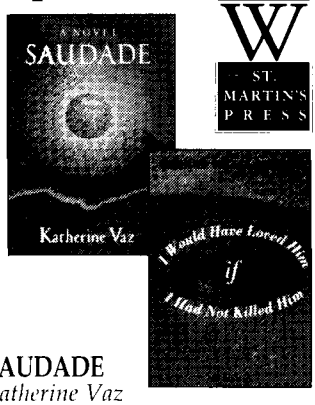

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IN THIS ISSUE:

So what is fact and what is fiction? Some people worry a great deal about this. I've known some who threw up their hands in despair and said that nothing was real, only what was in their heads and what they said or wrote. They thought this was real.

Why do you have to choose? Why not just think that everything is real?

—Louis Simpson,
"Waterloo, the Story of an Obsession," p. 227.

In the end, Edmund Wilson is a man whom it may be difficult to like but whom it is impossible not to admire. He had the courage of his lack of religious convictions: no whining about death occurs in these journals, no terror about the prospect of oblivion is expressed. With lust guttering out, curiosity narrowing, even his need for intellectual domination waning, he regrets only that he has reached the point when "one cannot even imagine any more the time when one had once participated . . ."

—Joseph Epstein, "Bye-Bye, Bunny," p. 235.

Ethnicity was a stark, straightforward affair back where and when I grew up. You fit into two overlapping categories: you were either white or black, Catholic or non-Catholic. As a child, I was fascinated by the paradoxes presented by these categories: which was better, or worse, a black Catholic or a white Baptist?

—Carol Hart, "Growing Up German," p. 269.

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